



IZUSHIRO
ILLUST → RURIA MIYUKI

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THE GREATEST MAGIC MASTER'S RETIREMENT PLAN

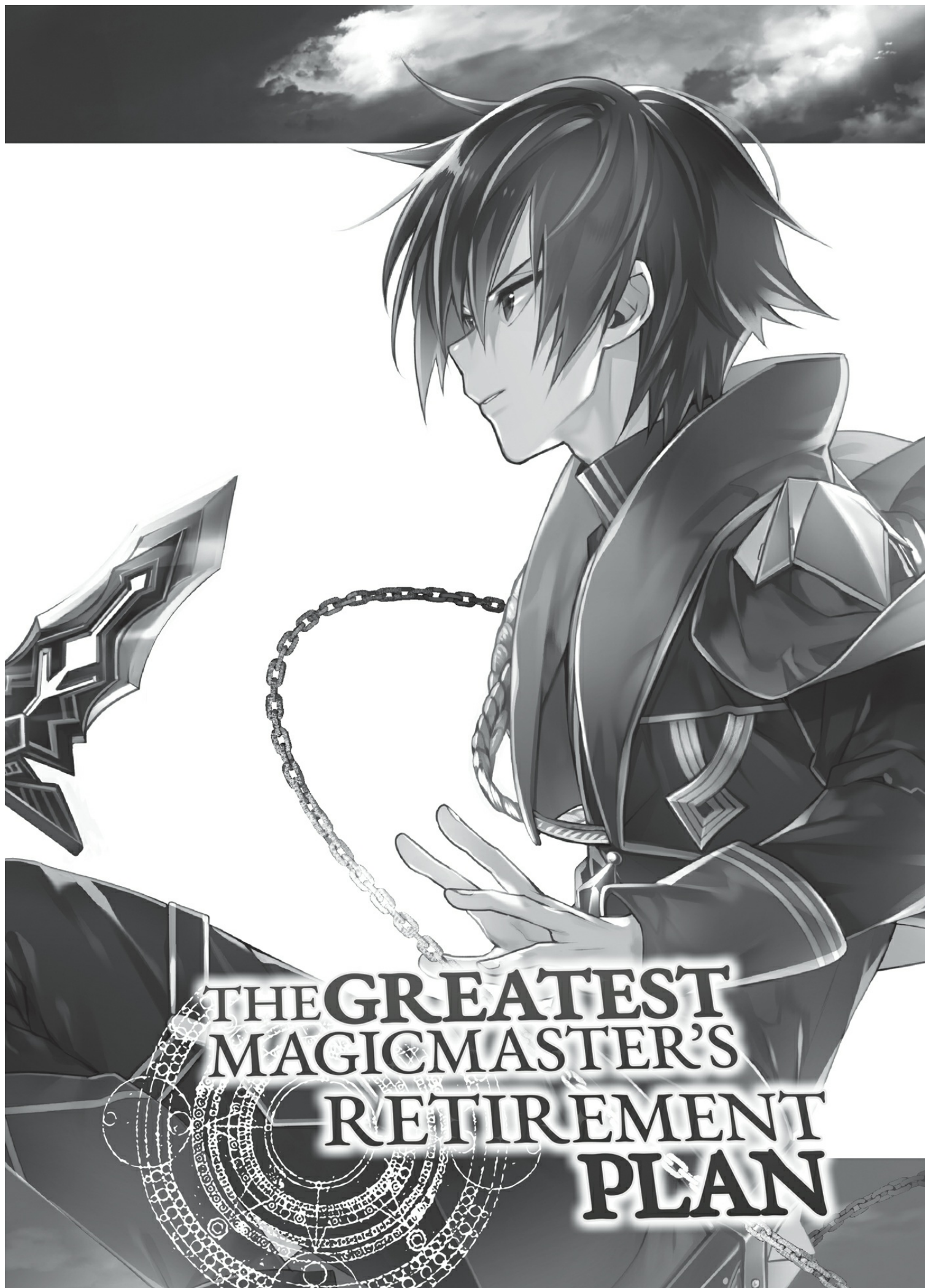
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The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan

C O N T E N T S

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Forty-Third Chapter

Awkward Good News

An announcement was made that stunned the militaries of all the nations, the shock spreading through them in ripples. It was a report on the elimination of a Devourer that appeared some dozens of kilometers out from Balmes' border.

It was, of course, kept from the average citizens, being revealed only to the upper echelons of each nation's military; but the details were surprising to say the least.

Just the name *Devourer* was enough to make people remember the horrible past. Not to mention that it had been designated as an SS-class Fiend. Because of that, there were some who doubted the truth of it. They would have to go back half a century just to find a comparable example.

In reality, despite being called the official report, the report had seen some alteration by Berwick, who'd had overall command of the operation. Details on Alus, and any mentions of his special ability, had been completely erased from the report. Aside from that, the credit wasn't given to Alus alone but to him and Lettie and the squad under their command.

The incident was finally settled, and only a handful of people knew the truth. Fortunately, the incident was enough to get the top brass of the militaries to adopt a more serious attitude. The battle against the Fiends had been long, and lately the tables had begun to turn in their favor, which made for a lax atmosphere—but this brought them right back to reality.

No matter how competent they might be, familiarity with the Fiends could make a person complacent. The military wouldn't get off their backside until a fatal mistake had been made. It wasn't until a while after they stepped off the right path before they would turn around, having finally realized their mistake.

The bigger the organization was, the more its leaders neglected to confirm where they were going. And after experiencing the threat of extinction, they

became arrogant in their belief that humanity could still make a comeback. But the state of affairs had improved somewhat for now.

The people of the world were still in a slumber. They had no way of knowing that the temporary peace they experienced now was all thanks to the efforts of a single boy with extraordinary powers.

The elimination of the Devourer Demi Azur had left Alus unconscious, but two days after he woke up, he and Loki returned to Alpha.

Upon his return, he was forced into helping to make a report of this unprecedented incident, which took another week. Not to mention that it took several weeks for Alus to fully recover and to treat Loki's legs. So, by the time Alus and Loki returned to their everyday lives, it was already the middle of November.

It had been a while since he'd lived an ordinary life, and even he felt some joy upon his return to it. However, at the same time, he felt a strange unease now that he possessed an overwhelming abundance of mana.

"Welcome back. Finally, huh," Tesfia said.

"It's been a while, Loki dear," Alice said.

It was early in the morning, and Alus and Loki had just come out of the research building when Tesfia and Alice called out to them. Both girls looked like they'd been waiting for this.

They hadn't set up a meeting or told them anything ahead of time. Maybe they'd seen the light on inside. They had their student bags and AWRs with them as usual, as opposed to when they'd been at the Friendship Magical Tournament.

But there was nothing that could welcome Alus back to his regular routine more than this sight, as if the balance of his everyday life had returned to normal. Now, the fact that he'd come back finally sank in.

"We're back. It's been a while," Loki returned the greeting, while Alus took a moment to process the strange sensation.

It didn't feel like it had been a while to him. He felt uncomfortable with himself, though, for accepting this sight as ordinary. He looked forward to the time when his regular days as a student would feel natural again.

Leaving Alus' feelings aside, Tesfia rushed up to him and peered at his face. "You've been away for a whole month now. Don't you think you're in danger of repeating a year?" She immediately hit a sore spot.

Alus decided not to ask how much they'd heard about the mission.

"It should be fine," Loki said, listening in from Alus' other side. "The principal should know the circumstances, so he should get a special exemption for the credits at least." She didn't seem worried in the slightest and had a happy expression on her face as she got closer to Alus.

"What, so it was all for nothing, then," Alice told Tesfia, with an amused and mischievous look on her face.

Meanwhile, Tesfia put her finger in front of her lips as if to silence her. Perhaps she was a little embarrassed as well, since her cheeks were red.

"Did something happen?" Loki asked.

"Actually, after you were absent for a few days, Fia and I started to worry about you advancing to the next year. We wanted to do something about your attendance at least, so we cheated a little... It was the first time I did something bad," Alice said in an inappropriately cheery voice.

"Oh." Alus caught on to what she meant.

Attendance checks differed from class to class. And there were plenty of teachers who relied on the good old method of reading names from a register and listening for the response. Some requested reports be submitted, or that licenses be shown, but the method was ultimately left up to each teacher. So it wasn't impossible to ask a friend to reply when one's name was called.

The Institute was well aware that this could happen, but as the Second Magical Institute was so prestigious, they didn't expect there to be any students who were that underhanded.

"I'm surprised such a proud noble would do such a thing," Alus commented.

“But that’s all I could do! Normally, you’re out if you don’t have enough attendance, you know!” Her methods were clumsy, but considering her personality, no one would have expected such behavior from Tesfia.

“You’ve worked hard for Sir Alus’ sake.” Loki looked like she’d revised her opinion of them and decided to give them praise.

“I wouldn’t call it hard...” Tesfia said.

“And we got caught in the end, anyways,” Alice added with a sly smile.

“Hm, I figured as much. Even if you got someone to imitate me, the principal would be keeping tabs on me anyway. You’ll need to put a little more effort into it. Since you’re a noble, you could at least bribe the faculty.”

“—!! That’s not cheating, that’s straight-up illegal!”

“It’s a joke... well, you know... it seems like I made you worry.” Alus turned his eyes away from Tesfia, scratching his cheek. He’d said it almost reluctantly and hoped the words would be forgotten quickly.

But Tesfia’s expression melted into a smile. “That’s okay. I caused you a lot of trouble before the tournament and with my mother. I’d like to repay you in whatever way I can.”

Seeing her refreshing smile, Alus realized her problems had subsided for now. “I thank you for your underhanded work,” he retorted sarcastically, and Tesfia grimaced.

“I was a little worried when it took you two so long to return. But I’m glad we can go to class together again.” Alice sounded relieved.

Alus couldn’t help but feel a little guilty when it came to her, but military matters took priority. That was the unspoken promise he’d made to Berwick. “Well, there were some complicated things going on.”

“Hmm. I see...” Tesfia said with a frown, but the light in her eyes betrayed her curiosity.

“What, you’re not going to ask for once?”

“If I asked, would you answer?”

“Not a chance. It’s too much of a bother,” Alus replied dismissively.

Tesfia pouted for a moment, but soon gave him a mischievous smile as if she’d seen that reply coming all along. Alice wore a similar expression and also didn’t ask any further.

However, both understood that Alus’ retirement was only a partial one, due to Berwick’s orders. And they knew there was a lot of secrecy involved. Alus and Loki couldn’t say a lot publicly, which was why they didn’t even try to get any hints out of them, showing consideration towards Alus.

He noticed this as well, but didn’t touch further on it, changing the topic for now. “But that aside, you two haven’t been skipping out on training, have you?”

If they’d shown any alarming reactions, he might have had to appeal to the principal to get them a babysitter... but these two were no slackers. They both puffed out their chests in pride and answered at the same time.

“Not at all!” Tesfia cried.

“Of course not,” Alice said.

That said, if they had, all of their training so far would have been a waste. Someone with Alus’ overwhelming talent was one thing, but all these two had was more motivation than most. As he looked at their expressions, it seemed that wasn’t all.

“Hehe, there’s one more thing we have in store for you,” Tesfia said. “It’s going to knock your socks off!”

“Yeah!” Alice added enthusiastically.

At those meaningful words, Alus asked, “Don’t tell me you two cleared it?”

The training stick that repelled mana made of the outer shell of the Salqueroit was a very plain training method. But the essence of mana control wasn’t something that could be picked up in a day. So the two completing the training stick method in such a short period of time showed how good they’d become.

But being able to completely clear it would mean they had talent that far exceeded that of a normal person.

“Ah... well... I wouldn’t go that far.” Alice picked up on Alus’ astonishment and

smiled wryly.

“Can you not raise the bar any more, please? We’ve become able to enchant it for a lot longer now!” Tesfia said in triumph.

Hearing that, it was Alus’ turn to shrug after realizing he’d expected too much. No, it was probably still impressive in its own right. He hadn’t seen their results for himself yet. If Tesfia was to be believed, their growth was still exceptional.

“Well, you can show me after class.”

“Yeah, look forward to it! But don’t expect too much, okay?”

“Which is it?”

“Well, just have the right amount of expectations...”

“Fia, you’re being so roundabout. You just want to get Al’s praise, don’t you?”

“N-No!” Tesfia moved to block Alice’s mouth, her cheeks a little red.

“... I just hope my expectations will be betrayed in a good sense.”

The two sighed in response to Alus’ curt words.

Incidentally, the mention of seeking Alus’ praise had earned Tesfia and Alice a sharp glare from Loki, but fortunately nobody noticed.

Either way, they’d all safely returned to their calm, everyday lives. Though Alus wasn’t fully satisfied as they headed for the main building...

As the way to the main building passed by the girls’ dorm, he saw an overwhelming number of female students on the path. The boys’ dorm was in a completely different location, so the presence of some boys on the path could only be explained by the fact that they were in puberty.

Walking along the path, Alus and Loki put on puzzled expressions as they noticed the strange atmosphere. It wasn’t a big deal or anything, but because of their line of work, they were sensitive to changes in atmosphere.

Seeing good friends walking together was the same as usual. But what was different was the tone of their discussions, which sounded livelier than before. It seemed to be mostly gossiping, but today they all appeared to be talking

about the same topic.

It was a mixture of emotions from expectation to envy, curiosity to doubt, but despite everything, it was clearly a topic all the female students were enjoying.

Amused by Alus' and Loki's reactions, Tesfia shrugged and smiled. "You'll find out soon enough."

"Right. It's been all the talk these days," Alice added, as she glanced at the female students out of the corner of her eye.

The strange atmosphere that Alus and Loki were sensing had even invaded the main building. An abnormal number of students were enthusiastically engaging in conversation. It was the same topic everywhere, with some even going from circle to circle to gather information.

In the classroom, it was the same. Alus didn't even have to strain his ears to pick up what they were saying, and he furrowed his brows. He felt an inexplicable bad feeling, akin to a chill.

"... From what I heard from an upperclassman, there's apparently no doubt about it."

"So it's been officially announced not just in Alpha, but in all seven nations?"

"No, only a handful of people in the military know about it. That upperclassman's parents have a lot of connections in the military, so it should be reliable information. It's been shared quite a bit among the second and third years."

"So, what about the name? What's his name?"

"That's the part that's wrapped in mystery!"

"Right... but still..."

"Yeah. I'm sure he's just fantastic. He's at the pinnacle of all Magicmasters, after all!"

"I wonder if we'll ever get a chance to see him."

"Keep talking! Supposedly, almost nobody's ever seen him, even in the

military. He's achieved so much alongside Lady Lettie, and seeing as how there's almost no information on him, it must be being kept secret for a different reason..."

As he looked at some of the male students gossiping, Alus felt a headache coming on.

The Devourer that had been eliminated had a threat level that was previously unheard of. While the details could be kept hidden, the event itself was impossible to conceal because it was a great feat that would go down in history. It may have taken place in the Outer World, but the scale was too large to hide.

Not to mention, rumors of the ranked No. 1 Magicmaster's involvement were circulating as if it were accepted truth. Alpha had dispatched the elite squad under direct command of the Single Digit Magicmaster Lettie, and the other six nations had sent in their strongest forces as well. Trying to hide all of that was simply impossible.

As a result, the fact that Alpha's two Singles had eliminated the threat leaked out, which gave way to all kinds of speculation. Of course, specific details had been squashed so as not to worry the general population.

Meanwhile, the female students were getting ahead of themselves with their wild delusions.

"There's no doubt about it. It's finally time for Alpha's ranked No. 1 to make his debut in the world! I don't know why the military is so secretive though..." one girl passionately exclaimed, as the others nodded their heads.

Alus' achievements weren't being covered up, but they hadn't been officially announced either. The top brass wanted to keep the fact that Alpha's ranked No. 1 was still just a boy quiet for the time being. In a few years, his age would better match his fame anyway.

This was the first time Alus and Loki heard what the students were talking about, but based on Tesfia's and Alice's expressions, it was indeed a daily occurrence. Thinking about these kinds of rumors being spread on a daily basis, Alus felt he did the right thing in not returning to the Institute for so long.

"As Balmes was in danger, he swept down to save them along with Lady Lettie

and her elites... how dreamy. Also, this is just between us, but..." Suddenly, the female student leaned in closer to the circle of girls. She purposefully held her palm over her mouth to whisper secrets. But, perhaps due to her excitement, she wasn't able to keep her voice as low as she'd intended, so it reached all the way to Alus. "The ranked No. 1 has already managed to reclaim the continents of Zentley and Covent."

The next moment, disappointed voices rang out.

"I knew that ages ago. News needs to be fresh!"

"Everyone knows that already."

The girl who was interrupted didn't look upset. If anything, she smiled, as if to say she got them. She let out an exaggerated sigh, before checking her surroundings.

"... Do you have anything else?"

"I-If you do, please do share."

The voices around her got excited again.

"Oh! I guess I have to... Actually, this is very recent information, and almost no one knows it... But it hasn't been officially announced, so you have to keep it a secret."

The female student's act made the girls around her swallow in anticipation.

It was there that Alus lost interest, figuring it would only be baseless rumors, but still, he couldn't keep the sound of it from reaching him at his desk. This was a standard lecture, so there were no assigned seats. As a result, Alus sat down by the window at the back, with Loki, Tesfia, and Alice taking seats on the same row. At some point, the four had begun acting together as if they were their own faction.

Alus realized he had some time left before first period, so he pulled some documents he'd brought with him out of his bag. Actually, this was pretty much the first time he'd brought his bag with him to class. Just as he stared at the first document and tried to shut out the outside world...

"That's not all. He's also been involved in solving all kinds of incidents within

the nation, performing great deeds in places we can't discuss!"

"That's amazing... but don't you think he's achieving too much? I'm sure he gets a constant stream of requests from the military, but is he all right?"

Alus unconsciously nodded at those words. If that's how they felt, he hoped they'd make a direct appeal to the Governor-General.

"That's true. Just because he's at the top of all Magicmasters, they can't just run him ragged. Anyways, I'm sure any mission he gets involved in is resolved in the blink of an eye."

One girl sighed. "I wonder what he's like."

The gossiping continued, and Alus' focus was forcibly brought back to reality. The female students were entertaining their delusions with ecstatic expressions. Their fantasy version of the ranked No. 1 was probably a perfect person without any semblance of flaws. The peculiar atmosphere that exuded from the teenage girls could only be described as detached from reality and dreamlike.

With a bitter expression, Alus kept his cheek from twitching, as he thought that unfortunately there was no such perfect man.

That said, considering the two major incidents with Godma Barhong and the Devourer, some information leaking out was probably inevitable. It was fine for now, but if someone with connections to the military's upper echelons took a real interest, then Alus' identity would come out in a matter of moments, shattering his peaceful student life.

He understood there wasn't even a faint hope of trying to impersonate someone else. After glancing at Loki, who had a satisfied smile on her face, Alus looked over to Tesfia. And what he got in response was a wry smile, as if to say, "See?"



If this had been going on for days like Alice said, then it would be an unbearable situation for Alus. *You can never really trust rumors, but it seems there's some degree of truth to them, like they're gradually approaching the truth.* Letting out a grand sigh, as if to ask them to spare him, Alus squeezed the bridge of his nose.

However, the circle continued...

"I'm sure he's a wonderful man! If he stood side by side with Sir Jean, it would make for such a wonderful picture!"

"Of course, he's one of the most powerful Magicmasters in history. I'm sure he's got the looks to match, just looking at him would probably take your breath away."

Hearing all this, anyone would feel pain at their selfish expectations. And Alus could feel his headache getting worse. He once again realized what a drag it was to keep his identity a secret. If the time came when he'd have to reveal his identity, he shuddered at the thought of how different he was from the image people had.

Noticing how Alus felt, Tesfia gave him a complacent smile and whispered, "Being a lady-killer must be rough..."

It was meant to be sarcastic, but Alus didn't have the composure to realize that, as he groaned.

Loki simply nodded her head, while Alice smiled wryly, neither confirming nor denying it.

That was when the female student in the center of the circle noticed Alus and the others and gave them a graceful curtsy. But the flaming passion of the girls around her made her turn her eyes back to them, as her blonde hair swayed.

She opened her shapely mouth as if to feed the chicks awaiting their food around her. Her graceful facial features and the way she conducted herself made it easy to guess she was a lady from a prestigious family.

The Institute had a large number of students from the nobility and the upper class. So that in itself wasn't particularly unusual, but Alus tried to recall if he

had such a glamorous classmate. He didn't pay any real attention to his classmates, not wanting to waste any precious memory on them. So if he couldn't remember them, it couldn't be helped.

Even as he looked around the classroom, he didn't really remember the faces or names of anyone aside from the three girls with him. But after hearing the female student's next words, she left a deep impression on Alus.

"About Ulhava, the Magicmaster who represented Alpha in the magical martial arts demonstration... a Magicmaster by that name doesn't exist. Not in Alpha, at least."

The circle buzzed with commotion over this, and the girl continued with a satisfied expression, "See, now you get it? I believe that he's the one. Actually, I had my older brother investigate it, and I'm all but convinced."

Well, if you thoroughly investigate it, it's something you could find out. But still... Alus casually looked over at the blonde student. If she was just a normal Magicmaster or half-baked noble, she wouldn't be able to get any leads on Alus. After all, it was Berwick who was in charge of controlling the information.

As if she'd seen through his confusion, Tesfia whispered to him, "Lilisha Ron de Rimfuge Frusevan. She transferred in during the Friendship Magical Tournament. The Rimfuges are a well-known family of Magicmasters in Alpha."

The head of the Rimfuge family was a lord who ruled a territory, a rarity in Alpha. While Alpha had a number of noble families, very few actually had territory of their own to rule. The administration of Alpha's land was under the control of the ruler, and there weren't many who wanted to rule a territory like that. An overwhelming majority leased territory instead, to keep up appearances.

This was a result of the aristocracy's power decreasing as their lands shrunk and their fiefdoms faded away. While they maintained the name of nobility, their authority was a mere shadow of the past. So there were only a few who lorded over territory in the present day.

"Anyways, it's a prestigious family known for producing excellent Magicmasters. But... it's unusual and strange for the youngest daughter to transfer in this late in the year."

As Alus listened to Tesfia, the name rang a bell even to someone as uninterested in nobility as him. It was a name he'd heard every now and then in the military.

Meanwhile, the girl in question continued, "It's actually Lady Cicelnia who recommended this Ulhava." The blonde girl, Lilisha, sounded amused as her words gathered the attention of those around her. Despite having transferred in at such an odd time, she appeared to be mixing in well with the class, thanks to the information she had on hand.

At the same time, Alus added her name to the list of people that might threaten his peaceful life at the Institute.

"Should we rake her over the coals, Sir Alus?" Loki casually said with an expressionless face.

But there was no room for doubt that she'd actually do it. If Alus ordered it, she'd surely call that Lilisha to the back of the building... and he didn't want to imagine what would happen then. "Leave it be. There's no real harm done yet. Besides, since she's nobility, she'll eventually learn that messing with me will only end up hurting her more."

"Okay..."

Alus was a bit worried over how easily his partner backed down, but considering the current atmosphere of the Institute, he realized it would be a waste of time to warn her every time.

That's when Alice changed the topic with feigned innocence. "That aside, the whole Institute is like this, so even we've been making guesses at your and Loki dear's mission. Though there are some parts that only we know."

"Even if I'm being kept a secret, I have a personal life as well. So the secret will reach its limit at some point. I'll just have to hope that the commotion doesn't get any bigger than this. I don't want any of you letting anything out either. It'll only be a pain for me."

"Of course not!" Alice replied immediately.

... But Tesfia paused for a moment, and said thoughtfully, "Well... the principal told us that too, and it's not like I'm going to go spread the word, but

do you think it's something you'll be able to hide forever?"

Alus himself had his doubts about that. Well, he didn't actually care about his status being leaked out. The problem was that his troubles would only increase. Most of all, he wanted to avoid getting pushed further and further away from his research.

However, the nuance in Tesfia's words seemed to have a different meaning from what he understood. Alus had only recently begun to understand how ignorant of the ways of the world he'd been.

Tesfia had her shortcomings, but maybe because of her noble background, she had a different point of view that she could bring to the table. Or maybe it was her lack of maturity.

As the teacher came in and the discussion came to a stop, Alus swapped places with Loki and urged Tesfia to continue. "What do you think, Fia...?"

Alice and Loki leaned in towards Alus to listen in, though Loki seemed to have a different objective in mind as she got closer than necessary.

"I just want to live a quiet life where nothing happens," Alus said. "Well, aside from you guys."

Tesfia, still being serious, split her focus from the lecture and spoke without looking his way. "I'm sure it's something Alice also knows," she sighed. "The talk may be focused on the great and mighty ranked No. 1 right now, but when we came back from the tournament, there was a festive mood here at the Institute."

Just the thought of it depressed him, but Alpha's victory was an unmistakable accomplishment. He was just happy that he hadn't been here for it.

Tesfia continued, as Alice nodded along, "At first, everyone was celebrating the win itself, but after they settled down, people started talking about the individuals involved. I mean, you did retire in the middle of it."

"Ah, yeah."

"Retiring like that without a reason is seriously frowned on. In fact, there's probably never been anyone who retired for any reason other than injuries.

Though Feli did try to help smooth things over, so there's not as much frustration over it anymore."

She rested her cheek on her desk as she said, "Eventually, everyone focused on your matches up to the finals."

"Was there a problem?" Alus asked.

"Of course there was! You know the average student's abilities, right? If you achieve a record-breaking five-second match, you'll naturally be the talk of the town. You only stood out a little before, but it's worse now."

"This is my first time hearing it..."

Tesfia had actually been busy with her own matches but had heard it from someone else. And she'd wanted to let Alus know about it. "Sheesh..."

Her expression seemed to say that he didn't understand how she felt at all. However, she didn't look too bothered by it.

Alus didn't feel much regret over what he'd done. If anything, he'd held back quite a bit. The magic he'd used was very basic; it was just that the match had been short. So he'd figured there wouldn't be any problems, but apparently that wasn't the case.

"They thoroughly grilled Alice and me, too," Tesfia went on. There wasn't any anger in her voice, but her exhaustion came through in her expression and gestures.

"Well, we're always with Al, after all. They asked us a lot of things, but the most common one was your rank," Alice whispered.

The principal had told them to keep quiet about it before, so it must've been quite the pain to deal with. "There's not much I can do about that. Even the Governor-General told me to let the opponent use a little magic, though." Alus had felt inconvenienced, and while he wasn't aware of it, he even felt a bit upset.

Loki was probably in the same position, but in her case, her rank had been revealed by the time she transferred in. Alus was just too far from the norm.

"Looks like I caused you two some trouble," Alus noted.

His completely unexpected words took Tesfia and Alice some time to process. Tesfia was the first to return to her senses and open her mouth. “Ahh, no, it wasn’t that bad... Ranking aside, I don’t think it’s possible for you to hide your full power.”

“You did nothing wrong, Al.”

The somewhat loud voice startled Alus for a moment. He turned around and saw Loki tightly pursing her lips. “There’s no way around it with such a big difference in ability. And you were still considerate on top of that! What more can they ask of you!!”

“Don’t get off the main point,” Alus told her, placing his hand on her head.

Loki didn’t look willing to back down on that point. She got even closer to Alus.

“Well, if the top brass does something, I won’t have to make any moves, though I doubt that’ll be the case the way Alpha is right now.”

“Is it that bad?” Tesfia asked him anxiously.

Thinking about it, Alus recalled that he’d revealed that Babel’s barrier was growing weaker. “Well, it’s mostly the same everywhere, but they’re all better off than Balmes. But it’s not like the rank of No. 1 is something you achieve by choice. It’s important to keep everything in moderation.”

“Don’t give us such hopeless talk.” Tesfia looked dumbfounded as Alus spoke these gloomy words. She used to believe that rank was the most important thing, so it was hard for her to process this. But unfortunately, there was no hope to be found in Alus’ opinion.

But Alus was only allowed to entertain these thoughts for a moment, as Tesfia took advantage of their talk to drop a bombshell. “Also, Mother, uhm... took a little... or rather, a lot of interest in you...” she squeezed out in a small voice, and Alus nearly blurted out his surprise.

But it was better than not being told about it. It was something he’d more or less caught on to when Frose Fable, Tesfia’s mother, made her way into the Institute and forced that promise out of him.

Seeing Tesfia so cornered was strange, but it was something that Alus had said himself. So it might be his just deserts. “I bet. Knowing her, I doubt you could do anything about her.”

“Well, yeah, but...”

“Then whatever will happen, will happen.” Alus took this opportunity to confirm something. “And, so what did your mother decide? Though I guess the answer is obvious since you’re here.”

He was asking about the promise Tesfia made with her mother about determining her potential as a Magicmaster. Even though there hadn’t been much time, both Tesfia and Alice had worked hard to prepare for the tournament.

The redhead puffed out her chest and secretly flashed Alus a V sign with a massive smile on her face. “I won, so of course it went perfect! Also, during my match with Alice... I managed to use Zepel!!”

“Seriously... I gave you hints, but I wasn’t sure you’d be able to handle it. Talk about missing the mark. I was sure one of you would finally drop out.”

“Hey!” Tesfia protested.

“Fine. I guess you’re going to have to tag along for a while longer.”

“That’s right. I look forward to it, Al!” Tesfia said with a bright expression.

Alice went along with the atmosphere and whispered, “Me too.”

However, it appeared Tesfia’s voice had been too loud, not to mention the way Loki was leaning in too close to Alus was suspicious, so the four of them became the subjects of a harsh scolding.

Finally, their classes were over for the day. And both Tesfia and Alice looked happy about it. That was because the training they’d been doing for over a month had become stagnant. But it wasn’t the training itself that was the problem, it was Alus’ absence.

Like Tesfia said that morning, the two had been keeping up their training even though he wasn’t there. Alus was vaguely happy about that, perhaps because

he'd realized this meant that he'd actually been teaching and guiding them. He'd simply thought he was playing the teacher role that Sisty asked him to, but as they spent time together, his feelings had begun to change.

But today, he was feeling a little tired. All that gossip was still on his mind. His image was taking on a life of its own, as he was being spun into a hero of the ages... it just diverged far too much from who he really was. Talk about depressing. Not to mention, most of the students seemed to look up to the ranked No. 1 as if he were a god.

Though Alus wasn't completely free from blame. His overwhelming power and great achievements created a mindset where people ended up relying on him, instead of steeling their own resolve.

In other words, their resolve to support Alpha themselves had weakened. As a result, no one made any attempt to reach the same heights that Alus had, feeling no responsibility, and basically they tried to get a free ride off of the glory he brought.

In a sense, the overly hasty changes Berwick pushed through using Alus' accomplishments had backfired. The military was currently functioning smoothly with Berwick at the top, but the idea of creating the image of an absolute, invincible hero to prop up novice Magicmasters who would then support the military in the future, now had the opposite effect.

Though in the Institute, it was Sisty's role to coordinate such matters... maybe the extracurricular lesson in the Outer World was a sign that the top brass was aware of the problem and hoped to alleviate it. That said, it was pretty rushed, so their plan was full of holes.

Anyways, Alus wasn't as much angry with the students' shallow thinking as he was exasperated. He'd taught Tesfia and Alice, however briefly, and gotten something of a grasp of what teaching was all about.

The people who at least claimed they were aiming to become Singles could still be salvaged. He wanted to lament the apathy of the youth who would make up the future, when he suddenly realized he was one of them and decided to stop thinking. That said, it would be quite the spectacle if he were to tell them a thing or two.

He could entertain the thought of spending the rest of his life in leisure while they handled the rest, but he probably wouldn't get the chance to say that out loud for a long time.

Alus sighed for the umpteenth time, as he gave up thinking.

Finally, he returned to the laboratory with Tesfia and Alice in tow. The next thing on the menu was confirming the results of their training. It might be just what he needed to turn around the depressed mood he had today.

Alus felt some degree of hope as he watched the two handle their training sticks. He narrowed his eyes and gazed at the flow of mana. *Is this because I'm a good teacher? Or do they have more hidden potential than I realized? They shouldn't be able to get these kinds of results this fast just through normal training.*

Even if he gave them the benefit of the doubt, their growth was still remarkable. Geniuses or not, it had only been six months since they'd started the training. Even if he overestimated their potential, it still should've taken over a year.

The training sticks were exceedingly effective for training mana control, but even then, their results were taking shape too quickly. Judging from their expressions, he could hardly say they were doing it with ease, but they were still overcoming the repulsion and were able to control the mana flow fairly well. That had been one of the final goals Alus had set.

Of course, even if they'd picked up the knack for mana control, it was something they'd have to keep up all the time. But having come this far, all they needed to do was to make a habit out of it.

As a practical example... if they were to fight third-year students purely with their AWRs, they'd use up half as much mana as a regular student. If anything, in that example, they'd be able to completely overpower an upperclassman. They'd likely be able to handle D-class Fiends without difficulty, as long as they could use their AWRs. Though there were, of course, exceptions to everything.

According to Alus' own norm, being able to enchant their AWRs in the Outer World for a few hours would be ideal, but that was hoping for too much. Nothing good would come from rushing the process. Regardless, he concluded

that he'd be able to leave the rest up to the two themselves.

Meanwhile, though Loki appeared calm on the surface, she was secretly surprised by their rapid growth. One of the cups of tea she'd been preparing had accidentally been filled up to the brim. She'd taken her eye off of her task for a moment to watch the two girls train.

When it came to live combat experience there was no comparison, but while Tesfia and Alice still weren't on Loki's level, when it came to mana control she was now within their reach.

Loki had plenty of experience in the Outer World and had trained from a young age, so she was very skilled at mana control. But she couldn't exactly brag about how long she could keep up precise control. As a result, she resolved to increase her mana control training starting today.

As Alus watched the two, he determined that they'd be able to carry on like that for another twenty minutes. "All right, that's enough."

"What?" Tesfia said. "I can still go on..."

The two were surprised, and looked at Alus with doubtful expressions, but he went on, "You can still go on for another twenty minutes, right? I don't have the time to watch all of that, but I've more or less got it."

The two girls smiled, giving his assumption more credibility.

Tesfia grinned proudly. "You could say that. We wanted to surprise you when you came back, so we did our best to try to find the trick to it."

The essentials varied from person to person, so it wasn't that easy, which was why Alus had made an upward adjustment of his evaluation of them. "It's certainly a surprise. I once had a Triple Digit acquaintance try it, but even they only lasted for around thirty minutes."

That was a problem in and of itself, but one couldn't just lump together all kinds of things to compare an active-duty Triple with students. Everyone had their own characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses.

"Having come this far, I suppose I should think about calling that enough for the mana control training."

When Alus said that, the two girls looked at him with aghast expressions and immediately began protesting.

“What?! Does that mean that the training is over? We’re still not on the level of being able to fight in the Outer World!” Tesfia exclaimed.

“Yeah. There’s so much we still want to learn... besides...” Alice said with a sorrowful expression, fearing their time training under Alus had come to an end.

Alus hadn’t expected this reaction but quickly corrected their misunderstanding. “Mana control is the foundation of all magic. And you’ve improved this much despite still being students. So you should be able to put up a good fight in the Outer World.”

“No, but...”

Tesfia was at a loss for words, so Alice took over. “Al... Is that all it takes for a Magicmaster to fight in the Outer World to you?” she painfully squeezed out with a desperate expression.

But that hadn’t been Alus’ intention. The edges of his lips curled up into a smile, but before he could say anything, Loki, carrying tea, intervened with an exasperated expression. “Sir Alus, if you’re too mean, they won’t answer another roll call for you.”

“Huh?!” Both Tesfia and Alice reacted.

“Right, sorry, that won’t do.”

In the past, Alus had put a training program together for the two girls and shown the documents to Loki. As they had different affinities, there were two sets of those documents. Incidentally, one of them was over 300 pages long.

Considering the volume, there was no way they’d be able to finish it all in the limited amount of time that they had. Knowing that, Loki felt that Alus was being a little mean taking this farce as far as he was.

Having been admonished, Alus honestly admitted to his fault. “You two are misunderstanding this. You’re still only just getting started on your training. In fact, the training I have in store for you has only just begun. But since we’ve

come to a good stopping point for the mana control training, we'll put a stop to that for now, and you'll have to keep practicing it on your own."

"Come on, then just say so from the start!" Tesfia said, huffing, before turning away to hide her relief.

Next to her, Alice let it show through gestures, as she put her hand over her chest and exhaled. But then she realized something, and asked, "So what are we going to do next?"

She had a light expression as she began, but by the time she finished her sentence, her expression had turned serious. She knew that the training to come would probably be even harsher than what they'd gone through so far. At the same time, she couldn't help but get her hopes up. Having gotten this strong just from mana control training, she had high expectations for the results of continued training.

And even Tesfia looked intrigued, as she eagerly awaited Alus' next words.

Alus saw their expressions, and took a sip of tea before answering with a mischievous smile, "What I'll have you do now... is study."

"What!!" Tesfia's jaw dropped. She wasn't good at being chained to a desk and stuffing her head with knowledge. She'd rather move her body. "W-Wait a minute! We already study enough in our classes; how is this related to training to fight in the Outer World?!"

"Fia..." Alice said in a pitying tone, looking at Tesfia sympathetically. She understood Tesfia's personality better than anyone. "You get that what Al will be teaching us will be far different from normal classes, right? I know you don't like sitting down at a desk, though. But Al, why studying? And what will it be about?"

"Fia, I get that you don't like studying, but that kind of Magicmaster doesn't live long in the Outer World," Alus said.

"Grr... but..." Tesfia looked like she had a headache already.

"First, I'll have you study up on Fiends. The Institute covers the basics, and you'll get some opportunities to learn in the military too, but once you join the military you won't have much time to learn. A newbie's not going to last for

long.”

“You mean what the Institute teaches isn’t enough? There’s even lectures on Fiends for all three years.”

Even after hearing what Alice said, Alus didn’t change his opinion. Institute knowledge and practical knowledge came from two different viewpoints. The lessons contained a lot of miscellaneous knowledge about Fiends because it was necessary to understand them from various perspectives, but that was different from living knowledge that was useful in practice.

“It’s true there’s a lot of lectures on Fiends. But they’re not on point. The historical facts on Fiends, their types and classes, as well as lectures using past examples, are certainly useful in their own right. Their data is backed up by research, and they use examples from history, so the lectures are indeed on a high level.”

“Then why?” Tesfia’s question still contained traces of hope that she’d be able to get out of studying.

“The lectures on Fiends are too diversified. I will only be teaching you one thing.”

The two looked at him with perplexed expressions.

Alus answered them with a smile. “Purely what you need to fight Fiends. Their weaknesses, characteristics, habits, and the like. It’s not knowledge to understand Fiends, but how to hunt them.”

Loki was sitting next to Alus, quietly listening with a cup of tea in hand. As someone with experience in the Outer World, it made a lot of sense to her.

“Is it really that important?” Tesfia asked.

Hearing such a superficial statement from Tesfia made Alus feel how deeply horrifying ignorance really was.

Meanwhile, Alice was refraining from making any statements. She was rarely frank or overly inquisitive. That was one of her virtues, but it could also be a weakness at times.

In other words, unlike the stupidly honest Tesfia, she didn’t try to address any

doubts she felt on the spot, and instead was likely to try and push forward while having only a vague understanding.

While they lived within the safety of the Institute, that was one thing, but in the Outer World, even trivial things could be fatal. Of course, Alus was going to correct those things about them, while he beat the tactics for defeating Fiends into them.

But even then... “No... there’s no point in calling you ignorant every time. I guess I was expecting too much from you,” he said to Tesfia, partly to alleviate his fed-up mood. Not to mention payback for making fun of him earlier about being a lady-killer. He really was being petty.

“Oh fine! You don’t have to be so mean.” Perhaps because she’d gotten to know Alus better, or maybe because she understood her own inexperience, Tesfia didn’t seem too upset as she accepted his terms.

“I never get bored of this kind of exchange.” Alus didn’t have much interest in others, but his fruitless back and forth with Tesfia was as refreshing as always.

“Come on, you two...” As always, Alice took on the role of mediator and put a stop to the nonsensical conversation.

“Before we get started, let me just say that studying isn’t all we’ll do. The main idea is for you to load up on knowledge, but you’ll be doing practical magic training too. Alice’s new spell is only halfway done, as well.”

“That’s true. That’s important, too. Yeah. Knowledge is nothing without the techniques to use it.”

“Oh Fia...” Seeing Tesfia become so obviously happy upon hearing there would be practical training, Alice smiled. However, there was a bit of envy in her. She couldn’t help but feel envious that her best friend could so openly show her feelings.

To give them a more detailed explanation, Alus sat down at the table alongside Tesfia and Alice. Loki was already seated, and as expected, she was interested to hear Alus’ lecture too.

“Ahem! Let me get straight to the point.” Seeing that the two girls were braced for what was to come, Alus cleared his throat and began. “My theory is

that the reason the death rate is so high for Magicmasters who encounter lower-classed Fiends, is because they simply lack the required knowledge. Of course, they get training when they enter the military, but there are gaps. There's an assumption that they learn the rest in the Institute, but that's the pitfall, not to mention that their training is insufficient."

Tesfia and Alice were seriously listening to his lecture.

"Not to mention that they join the military to eliminate Fiends, so they're put into live combat in the early stages. There's also the mindset that to become a first-rate Magicmaster, you start off with eliminating Fiends, so the knowledge side is left lacking. They tend to not even get the time to remember what they'd learned. It's especially common for new graduates to focus on accomplishments and flashy spells rather than a solid foundation of knowledge. By the time they realize that they're in an encounter with a tough Fiend, it's already too late."

Now even Loki listened in on what Alus had to say.

"I did approach the Governor-General about it, but there are simply too many missions that need to get done. There's a lot of things that need to be done during training, and a limit to how much time they have. So the best would be for it to be taught to them while they're students, but that would put too big of a load on them. Moreover, there's been studies on the fundamental reason for the high death rate, with various measures being taken into consideration."

Alus paused, then walked over to a massive bookshelf in a corner of the laboratory. He pulled out a thick book and flipped through it.

It was like an encyclopedia containing detailed information on Fiends. It was a rare book, not something one could easily get their hands on. Yet Alus casually spread it out on the table. "In other words, if you don't understand the essence of the individual species, you won't be able to take the appropriate actions. Even if victory is impossible and you're forced to retreat, a detailed report must be made to the military. And if you don't have the necessary knowledge, you can't even make an informed decision on whether or not retreat is possible. Then there's the fact that only the Magicmasters who encounter the Fiend have the specific information on it, especially when you're dealing with a new species. With no information to go on, there tends to be a lot of casualties,"

Alus concluded, as memories of a massive invasion a few years ago flashed through his mind.

There were plenty of tragic deaths back then, and the lack of reports on the A-class Fiend that appeared at that time had been a primary cause of those deaths. “If information on a type of Fiend is well known, you’re able to tell what class it is just by looking at it. But Fiends have the ability to eat and evolve, and there’s also the Variant class, so this book doesn’t have all of the Fiends in it.”

“So there’s not much of a point, then,” Tesfia observed.

“Let me finish. While Fiends can grow from eating, their abilities rarely get much stronger than their base form. So if you have the knowledge of the base form, you’ll be able to predict what its abilities are. For example, the Ledge Monkey is common around Alpha. You’ve heard about them in class too, haven’t you?”

As the Ledge Monkey could be found just about everywhere in the vicinity near Alpha, they were often brought up as examples in lectures. They were practically the first example that popped up in the textbook. They had, as their name would suggest, the appearance of a monkey.

Incidentally, as with regular monkeys, humanity had no way of telling if they were going extinct or just lived in an extremely limited region.

Digressions aside, this Fiend was similar to a human child; small in stature, with long arms. Moreover, its skin was as tough as rocks. Despite that, it had many joints in its arms and legs, and was able to swing its arms like whips.

“Ledge Monkeys have an E-class classification. But that’s only true for before they’ve gotten the chance to eat. Once they evolve, Variants aside, they’re closer to middle and high-classed Fiends. That’s why they’re a major Fiend for new Magicmasters to deal with. But without that knowledge, they can lack sufficient caution, to say the least.”

Alus flipped to the page on Ledge Monkeys as he spoke. “If you have to be on guard for this guy, what do you think you need to pay attention to first?”

“...” “...”

Taking the girls’ moment of silence as a sign that they didn’t have any answer,

Alus continued, "Above it. Above where it is. There are always other Fiends in the Outer World. Say you were sent out to deal with a flock of Ledge Monkeys. You should keep an eye out above you, at the tops of tall trees, and the like. This guy also weighs more than he looks, so he'll be seated on larger branches. Not to mention, these guys prefer to stay in groups, and make a single large tree their home. They're also more cowardly than they look. Though I guess you could also call them cautious."

That's when Tesfia raised her hand to ask a question. "But considering its low class, shouldn't you be able to handle them immediately instead of dealing with all that?" She must have understood them to some degree and wasn't planning on denying what Alus was saying outright. But perhaps she was trying to dispel her doubts.

Or maybe she was still reluctant to study. So Alus replied using reason and logic. "So what if you couldn't kill them?"

Unable to deny this truth, Tesfia nodded in understanding.

"I have no complaints if you can take them down. But in the Outer World you'll be working as a squad. You need to make sure you don't make the wrong decision. There's no guarantee you'll only ever come across enemies you can beat. And that's not just on the frontlines, either. The unexpected can happen anywhere in the Outer World."

Both Tesfia and Alice straightened their postures as they listened to a veteran speak.

"That's why nothing bad comes from having practical knowledge about Fiends, as well as being prepared for the unexpected. If anything, you're more likely to die without it. And while there's no problem if you can defeat them, there's a lot of factors you need to consider in the Outer World. A past infestation was caused by a B-class Fiend moving in near the tree they were using as their home. So since they couldn't stay in their dwelling, they mass migrated. Magicmasters on the ground need to keep their eyes open for this kind of situation."

Reaching a stopping point in his explanation, Alus took a sip of his now lukewarm tea. If anything, he preferred it at that temperature.

Tesfia, Alice, and Loki all clapped. It couldn't quite be called a crowd applauding with only three of them, but his explanation had been quite convincing.

That said, this was knowledge Loki should have already known, so it shouldn't have been anything for her to praise again.

"I see," Tesfia said. "But if it's so important, then why doesn't the military put more focus on it?"

"Like I said..." Alus rubbed his temple, as he had to repeat himself. "The problem isn't the military, it's the Magicmaster's frame of mind."

"By which you mean...?" That may have been news to Loki, too.

"That's the disadvantage of a rank system. By ranking Magicmasters and having them compete for glory and fame, it was the best thing they could do for the predicament humanity was in then. Morale rose, and the number of candidates rose. But as the times changed, the rank system has become more of a shackle. Nowadays, they think they've finished their academic work as soon as they join the military, and stop any further studying. Beginners in particular tend to end up focusing on training their abilities. The more inexperienced they are, the more they focus on their rank, but that's the result of how Magicmaster society is constructed. The more skilled they are, the less focused on the rankings they become."

As Alus added, "Well, nothing will come from saying that," Loki cast her eyes down and her expression darkened a little.

The majority still wanted the military to focus on enhancing Magicmasters' abilities. Berwick understood the situation as well, but he had a hard time overturning the ingrained thinking.

Even just learning practical information on Fiends required a vast amount of time. In the past, there'd been attempts to rotate out defensive squads and give them additional training, but there were protests over the loss of precious personal training time, forcing them to give up on the idea.

In the end, it was a difficult choice to make. Even more so as ranking affected salaries, so even if they wanted to make changes, nothing was going to happen

overnight.

“Anyways, if you’re going to ask me for lessons, then you should realize that training on spells alone won’t be enough. I take it there are no objections?” Alus knew these two would understand after he’d so thoroughly explained himself. Besides, his training of them was on the condition that they give up on improving their ranking, and they’d agreed to that.

However... “...!!” Alus reacted as Tesfia obediently nodded, but Alice quickly raised her hand. He found this unusual since Tesfia was normally the one to do this. “You object, Alice?” He looked at her questioningly.

Alice quickly realized the misunderstanding and shook her hands in front of her face. “No! Not at all! I’m all for picking up practical knowledge. Yeah, all for it!”

Then what? Alus furrowed his brows as he looked at her, but soon found himself aghast at her next words... and for several seconds at that.

“But you haven’t forgotten about the campus festival taking place at the end of the year... have you?”

Forty-Fourth Chapter

Campus Festival

The campus festivals that took place at the various magical institutes in the seven nations were very different from those at regular schools.

The Institute's annual campus festival was, in a sense, a huge campaign event. It also had the goal of showcasing the Institute's appeal, and there was another reason behind the scenes.

The state was the Institute's governing body. The Institute was also a subordinate organization under the military. Meaning that it was built on taxpayer money and the citizens' approval. That was why all official information on the Institute was available to the public.

Also, even though humanity's survival might be at stake, the training of Magicmasters wouldn't work as a national policy if the people were opposed to it. If they got a bad reputation, parents wouldn't let their precious offspring enroll at the Institute no matter how much talent they might have. And considering that scouts from other nations might pilfer their students, the military put even more effort into the festival.

Nevertheless, novice Magicmasters were considered students, and so the festival would be open to criticism if it was too militaristic. In that sense, the Second Magical Institute had successfully pulled off their first extracurricular lesson and improved their image.

Even though it was an established tradition, there was likely going to be even more effort put into the festival this year. In the city of Beliza, where the Institute was located, the local stores in the school's vicinity were allowed to set up stalls on the campus grounds. There were a lot of students at the Institute, but the grounds were still larger than what all the students could use, making it a good way to boost the local economy.

Aside from the stalls, and formal invitations sent to people outside of the

Institute, managing the festival was left up to the students. For this event, there was a rule that each practical skills class had to come up with at least one stall or exhibition.

It sounded a bit frivolous, but the idea was justified by saying that a break every now and then was necessary to foster a sense of cooperation in the Outer World. All kinds of events would be held during the festival.

All of the above was a summary of the campus festival that Sisty explained to Alus. And, he hadn't gone to the principal's office of his own accord, but instead Sisty had called for him over the Institute's broadcast system.

It started off with the usual praise for his recent accomplishments, and then moved on to how credits and lectures had been handled while he was away. Alus had ultimately been exempt, but even the principal had needed each teacher's permission.

He had told her to fire anyone that wouldn't accept an exception, but the grown-up world wasn't that simple. After bargaining with some of the teachers, they submitted a report to convince them. Alus disapproved, but that was pretty much expected.

The Governor-General would have to be asked again, but the credit exemption would probably be used again in the next term. As long as Alus did the bare minimum, he would receive extra credits. Of course, it wouldn't affect the overall grade that would be announced at the end of the term, but that was trivial to Alus.

That's why there was a different reason for Alus' reluctant—or rather, critical—stare directed at Sisty.

"There are always a certain number of guards hired for the campus festival," Sisty explained.

"I bet. Even travel over the borders is free during the festival, right?"

"That's right. There aren't many restrictions to begin with, but at this time of year, the Institute is able to designate a Circle Port for direct access. Because of that, they're always on high alert, keeping a look out for any movements from terrorists or anti-Magicmaster organizations, though the festival is already busy

and full of trouble without them. We can also call in additional military personnel for security...” Sisty trailed off.

At this point, Alus was more or less able to guess what the principal was getting at. Or rather, he’d been made to realize it. Either way, he got right to the point. “And by that, you mean me.”

Sisty clapped her hands together in front of her face, smiling brightly at how smart her pupil was. She even gave him a charming, upturned look, as expected from such a devilish woman, but it was only a superficial gesture. Her age was a secret, but Alus wasn’t blunt enough to call her too old for that kind of thing.

He had a bitter taste in his mouth and put on a stiff expression. Still, just how effortlessly had Sisty made her way through the world by making those kinds of gestures? He couldn’t help but think how beneficial it was to be a beautiful woman.

Realizing that this was another such trick, Alus put up a token resistance by anticipating her next words.

“Please. Can you join the student-organized campus security?”

“...” It was obvious what she’d ask. The moment of silence wasn’t so he could think about it, he was simply speculating whether the students’ lack of spirit was a result of the quality of their principal.

In the end, being as powerful as Alus came with a fair amount of responsibility. Though he might have a thing or two to say about getting the short end of the stick.

“I’ll exempt you from having to put anything out for the campus festival... please?”

Alus still kept his stiff expression, but it wasn’t a bad deal if he could avoid all of those troublesome things. It felt like he was falling into the principal’s trap, but he decided to ignore that thought.

The other day, Alus’ class had held a meeting on what to do, and the most prominent idea had been to do a coffee shop. They had top-class beauties among them, so there was no reason to avoid service-based stalls. Despite that, the idea ended up getting shot down.

“So what’s going on with the deployment of the most reliable security personnel that can be requested from the military?”

His words caused Sisty’s expression to brighten up. “... Does that mean you’ll do it?! Thank you!”

Next, he heard her mumble, “This cologne had a suspicious name, but I’m glad I bought it,” and things started making sense. When he’d stepped into the office, he noticed a strange smell. It had a floral and oddly sweet scent. He’d furrowed his brows, but decided not to question it any further... but he had to deny this.

“I heard that... By the way, the smell had nothing to do with it.”

“Wait, really?! But this cologne is called Bewitching Garden...”

“You’re a teacher, don’t go buying suspicious products like that! And don’t try them on me!”

Sisty tilted her head in confusion, as she sniffed at her wrist. “When I tried it on another boy, it was very effective, you know.”

Hearing this just exhausted Alus more. “Did you lose your sense of judgment after getting too worked up? Who tests these things on their own students?”

“I just asked them to do some things for me,” Sisty giggled, leaving Alus completely speechless, only able to shrug his shoulders. “Right, we were talking about the deployment of the military personnel. This is a problem every year, but we don’t want the campus festival to feel overly strict. So we avoid deploying them in places that will stand out, or that see a lot of traffic. They tend to end up patrolling the outer perimeter, things like that.”

“Meaning, I’ll be working inside the campus grounds and the corridors in the main building, then.”

“Yes, there will be a cluster of stalls and other things around the main building. Well, I’ll be expecting you to cover the places with a lot of people.”

Alus interpreted this to mean a simple security job. On the one in a million chance that a terrorist incident occurred on campus grounds, it wouldn’t be the students who dealt with it. In other words, the plan was to eliminate all risks

beforehand by leaving the pre-entry inspections to the experts.

According to Sisty's explanation, bringing in dangerous goods for no apparent reason would be restricted. However, the event would see enough visitors to fill a city, so it was impossible to closely inspect everyone. There'd be simple mana detectors at the entrances, but they only reacted to mana, so they weren't perfect.

So, on top of that, several dozen people would be inspecting the visitors' belongings. But there were loopholes in that, as AWRs were allowed in if they had special permission. The reason for that was because the campus festival had a certain main event, and AWRs were essential for that. That made security more of a pain.

Not to mention that the Institute had close ties to the military, so they couldn't afford not to hold that event since it was so well received by the military personnel, making it an unavoidable part of the festival. So far there had been some squabbles, but nothing major had happened.

But this year they'd won the Friendship Magical Tournament, so the Second Magical Institute's name caused ripples inside and outside of Alpha. There would probably be a record number of visitors this year because of that. So the military was being more cautious than usual, even supplying some of their valuable spotters.

After giving her explanation, Sisty added one last thing. "Well, consult with Ms. Felinella on the details."

"Excuse me?"

"She's the management committee chair this time around. I'm sure she'll find your help reassuring, so my request is that you go and assist her."

Alus rubbed the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. He did have some lingering guilt for retiring partway through the tournament and causing Felinella some troubles. He also knew how hard she'd worked in the tournament.

In the end, the principal's strange cologne or long history of manipulation had no impact on his decision.

Besides... Sisty would never say it out loud, but she was working quite a bit

behind the scenes to manage Alus' grades and class skipping. If they followed the usual rules, Alus would have already had to repeat a year, but he'd gotten away with just a report because she'd personally lowered her head to the stubborn veteran teachers. It wasn't possible to refuse the military's orders in the first place, whereas Sisty was responsible for all the problems in the Institute, so she probably had a hard time with it.

Feeling like she might not have been convincing enough, Sisty went on, "Campus security detail does benefit the military's opinion of you after graduation..."

"I'd rather pass on that."

"Thought so. T-Then, what about the restricted area of the Institute's library? And an indefinite loan period... would that work?" She was practically pleading with Alus. The scent of Bewitching Garden wafted through the air...

... But Alus, annoyed, tried to bat it away. Thinking about it, what was one of the Three Pillars doing working as a principal when she had nothing to gain from it? He wondered about this, but then recalled his first meeting with her.

And that was why... he convinced himself. *That* must have been the deciding factor. "I understand. If I recall, the libraries of the various institutes cooperate and lend rare books between them. You don't mind me making full use of that for personal reasons, then? Also, please add new research books to the library."

"Yes, of course. Don't worry about it!" With a bright smile on her lips, Sisty flashed a V sign. She swung her fingers back and forth like a metronome, and after Alus sighed for the umpteenth time, their discussion came to an end.

The next day, there was an official announcement over the broadcasting system that it was time to prepare for the campus festival.

The class held a meeting to discuss the event. The first step was selecting a representative, which Alice unanimously won.

Loki hadn't been chosen because of her image. She gave off a stiff and hard to approach impression, after all. Even if she wasn't always with Alus, she didn't present the atmosphere of someone who was easy to casually ask for things.

Tesfia had been a candidate too, but she had surprisingly little support among

the boys. In short, it would be inconvenient for many of them if she was the representative. After all, most of the prime candidates for a stall were service focused. The design of the female students' uniform was important, but it was concluded that Tesfia would likely reject any of the design proposals based on male desires.

So their focus ended up on Alice, who was popular with both the boys and the girls. Not to mention how she'd earned the trust of the students after proving herself at the tournament. She was rather uncomfortable standing in front of people, but she had no choice but to accept when she was asked.

However, right after she'd been chosen, the way she timidly and fearfully appeared in front of everyone made even Alus mutter, "Get used to it."

Still... three days is just too much, Alus thought to himself, as the sun started to set on the classroom.

Three days had passed since Alice was chosen as a representative. That was how long it took for the class to decide what to do. Alus was free from doing preparations in exchange for working security detail, but he had to attend all the discussions anyway.

Ultimately, the boys' suggestion of the coffee shop received vehement opposition from the girls and was struck from the suggestions list. That was in part because they couldn't make full use of the class' three beauties, Tesfia, Alice, and Loki.

In the middle of the discussion, someone brought up that the three had performed so remarkably in the tournament that they would be taking part in the highlight of the campus festival, the mock battles.

The mock battles were the reason people were permitted to bring in AWRs. They were originally meant to show off the results of the Institute's training, using the Institute's arena so they could freely battle against the Friendship Magical Tournament participants.

That was more or less the duty of everyone who'd had a reasonable record in the tournament, and Alus shouldn't have been an exception. But fortunately for

Alus, he would be wrapped up doing security work, so he would be exempt from it.

Felinella and the principal were probably being considerate of him, but he was just glad that accepting the security job had gotten him out of it.

Alus' class ended up choosing to do a shooting gallery. The girls had protested against all of the boys' ideas and ultimately settled for that. They'd arrived at it by process of elimination. It didn't really have the support of the full class, but not much could stand in the way of adolescent zeal.

That said, as their stall wouldn't require a lot of personnel, the class would be able to enjoy the rest of the festival, so they convinced themselves that it wasn't all that bad. It went against the point of the festival and was very unambitious, but... maybe that was fine. It wasn't like youth to try to take everything adults wanted into account.

On a side note, the stalls would be ranked by the total amount of sales, the percentage of visitors to the stall, and by a questionnaire given to them. The number one class would be given the benefit of occupying a section of the training grounds for half a term. Moreover, the sales would be distributed to the class.

Tesfia had a glint in her eye, as did the other self-supporting students. That's why, even though it was only a shooting gallery, they were going to spice things up to entice more visitors. And they would do that by utilizing the tools for the stall.

As a benefit from having won the tournament, more goods were flowing into Alpha. Among them was a certain unusual toy that was gaining popularity. It was a relic of the past called a gun. The gun hadn't been modified to make it usable in this day and age as a weapon, but rather it had been turned into a toy-like object known as a spell gun.

The toy originated in Clevideet, and when children took to it, its sales exploded. It was a toy that allowed anyone to fire out their mana as bullets.

Of course, the bullets were modified so that they wouldn't be any more dangerous than a peashooter. Alus' class had zeroed in on these toys, deciding to use them for their shooting gallery.

Even after this was decided, there was more to discuss. The mana bullets showed a slight difference in power depending on the amount of mana that was used, but the question was whether it was all right to ask customers to use up their mana.

That really started the debate, and arguments had been flying back and forth for three hours. It began right after class and by now it was already dark outside.

Alus was so frustrated that he blurted out that he knew someone who could improve the guns. This wasn't like him, but he couldn't stand wasting any more time.

Next to him was Loki, who kept her eyes closed, but she was obviously getting irritated herself. All Tesfia did was let out an exhausted sigh, having given up on coming up with ideas or suggestions.

From Alus' point of view, he couldn't even stand to watch Alice on the stage anymore. She was already shy as it was, but now she was frantically collecting all of the suggestions being thrown at her, as well as the criticism. The sight was beyond pitiful and well into the territory of shedding tears.

But it wasn't as though Alus stated his idea irresponsibly. He didn't dislike coming up with ideas to modify items that used mana. He even found this popular toy somewhat interesting... of course, the person he knew that could improve them was himself. As the gun was empty inside, it wouldn't be too hard or take too long to figure out its structure.

If the problem was that customers would use their own mana, then he could just ask Sisty or someone in the military to borrow an artificial mana generator. And if that didn't work, there was one in the corner of the Institute that Loki used for her training.

Thankfully, Alus' declaration brought an end to the fruitless discussion. It was decided that everyone would bring in items of their choosing for prizes. Each class had funds allotted to it, so as long as they bought the spell guns and shelves to line the prizes up on, they were as good as done.

It felt like they were cutting corners, but Alus had no objections. He'd never had any intention of manning the stall in the first place, and it wouldn't require

a lot of people anyway. So no matter what happened, none of the troubles would come back to him as he worked security. Moreover, this way the preparations wouldn't have an impact on Tesfia's and Alice's training.

However, one week later... Alus realized he should have thrown that carefree idea into the trash bin.

The kind of prizes that students living in dorms could get wouldn't be anything useful. Incidentally, even if they wanted to use the budget to buy prizes, it had already dried up for some reason.

First off, it took more money to decorate the classroom and set up the stall than expected. On top of the decorations and materials, the male students had carelessly bought seven spell guns that were of a popular limited edition.

They couldn't push all the responsibility onto Alice, but it was sad to see her dispirited over everything because of her straight-laced personality. At the same time, she had to keep up her training as well. Even now, she and Tesfia were in the middle of studying like mad, as Alus improved all seven spell guns sitting next to them.

He'd volunteered to do the modifications himself, but once he actually got to work, he found the guns to be poorly designed with no real novel ideas to them. It should've been obvious to him when he'd been told they were just toys, but he couldn't help but feel disappointed, and now it was only a rush job to him.

Alus took the toy apart and fiddled with it, as he glanced at the two girls. They were busier with preparations for the campus festival than they'd expected, and it was getting in the way of their progress in studying.

Alice in particular was on pins and needles because of all the responsibility she'd taken on and wasn't into the studying at all.

Tesfia was also having trouble concentrating, perhaps out of concern for Alice, or maybe because she'd always been bad at studying.

Alus sighed and noticed Loki was passionately making something. "Hm? What are you doing, Loki?"

"W-Well. Uhm... I'm making a simple scrunchie. They need as many prizes as they can get, so I figured this would do."

“A scrunchie?”

“Uhm, it’s to put up your hair. It’s a hair tie.”

“So it’s handmade, huh? Should work.” Even an amateur in fashion like Alus could tell the scrunchie was pretty stylish.

Prizes were provided by the students themselves, but Loki had little in the way of personal belongings, which was why she’d turned to making them.

As for the two who should have been doing the same thing as her, they were as distracted as ever.

Of course, Loki wasn’t an expert when it came to sewing and the like, so she was doing her best with a manual at hand.

“Aww, that’s nice. Can you make one for me too, Loki dear?”

“But your hair’s not long enough to need one.”

“Yeah, that’s why I’ll keep it stored away for safekeeping,” Alice said enthusiastically, but only received a quick “No, thank you” in return.

Every student only needed to provide one prize each, but it appeared that this was oddly challenging.

“So what are you two going to do?” Alus asked the two girls, having given up on making them focus on their studies.

“Yeah, what are we going to do about that? Alice, don’t you know how to knit or something?”

“You can’t knit either! Don’t make it sound like I’m the only one who can’t do anything...”

“A-Anyways, maybe someone who knows how can do it for us, too...”

What a pointless conversation, Alus thought. It was an emergency situation, but that didn’t mean they could rely on others.

That’s when Tesfia took a stab at Alus, perhaps catching on to what he was thinking. “You don’t know how to knit either, Al.”

“Like hell I would! The only thing I’ve ever stitched was my own wounds. Not that I was any good at it.”

“Aaaaaaaaahhh, I can’t hear you,” Tesfia said, covering her ears and shouting so she couldn’t imagine the sight.

“I didn’t really think about prizes, but something just lying around here should do,” Alus said.

“That’s not going to work,” Tesfia protested. “We can’t give out anything that would give the Institute a bad image.”

“...!!” Loki reacted to what Tesfia said by looking down at the scrunchie she was making. She wasn’t very confident, and suddenly stopped working.

“T-That’s not what she meant, Loki dear! She’s saying that giving out used things would be bad...” Alice was so flustered that she was practically in tears, but Loki nonchalantly replied that she didn’t mind.



Tesfia put in her two cents, agreeing with Alice. “I’m sure yours will be the most popular... it’s handmade after all. As long as they say who made it, it should be fine. Probably.”

Leaving Loki to herself, Tesfia started to worry over her own situation. It seemed the majority of the class had the same issue with producing prizes.

“But wouldn’t it go against the point of the festival if you just bought it? Why not follow Loki’s example and make them yourselves?” Alus’ point was spot on. Vague as his understanding was, even he understood that Tesfia and Alice were popular with the male students. If Loki’s handmade scrunchie was worth something, then the same should be true for them.

“Huh? But, uhm...”

Seeing Tesfia’s eyes drift off to the side, he could more or less guess what her problem was. “You really are awkward...” At this rate, she wouldn’t be able to focus on studying until after the campus festival was over, which was a big problem for him.

“You haven’t thought of anything either!” Tesfia said accusingly.

“Like I said, I’ll just pick something lying around over there.”

“Didn’t you hear what Alice said?”

“Hmph, don’t think this is the same as the trash lying around in your room. For example,” Alus said, pointing at a certain piece of research equipment in the corner of the room that had a strange oblong bundle propped up against it.

Before long, everyone was staring at it. Back when they’d cleaned up this room, they’d all noticed it but hadn’t given it a second thought. The only thing they thought about it was how it got in the way because of how big it was.

“What is that thing, anyway?”

As if to answer her question, Alus had Tesfia go over and hold the oblong bundle. “This is a prototype for an AWR I made before enrolling at the Institute. It may be just a prototype, but it’s still the real thing. Its performance is more than good enough.”

“—!!” “—!!” Both Tesfia and Alice reacted.

“But I haven’t had the time to unpack it since I came here. I don’t need it anymore, but I’m glad I didn’t throw it out when you told me to,” Alus said with a grin. “And just so you know, it’s brand new. It’s a bit advanced, but to be able to get a gem like this at a shooting gallery is a pretty good deal.”

As he removed the cover, an AWR appeared that nobody aside from himself had ever seen. It was a silvery-white rod without any scratches, with blades stuck in sheaths on either side. At first glance, it looked like a spear that had a sharpened point on the handle as well. Moreover, there was a ring in the center of the handle, with the handle itself piercing through it.

“Hey, what’s so advanced about it?” Tesfia asked, though she looked intrigued.

“This spear looks pretty... amazing,” Alice said, enraptured by its appearance.

“This is pretty much the prototype for Alice’s AWR. I took it in a different direction, and in terms of simple craftsmanship, the gold spear is superior. This one is still state of the art, but it’s got its quirks... this silver one is more the type that relies on the skills of the Magicmaster to make the best of it. I made it with Double Digit Magicmasters in mind, after all.”

“So there’s something more to it then, Sir Alus?” Loki asked, not missing the details. Her question either came from her complete trust in Alus or from her own intuition and experience.

Either way, Alus nodded and began explaining as he removed the sheaths. “The blades on either side are engraved with magic formulas of different attributes.”

He raised a finger, a sign that he’d entered his usual lecture mode. “To sum it up, it combines the strengths of two attributes. Most Double Digits have learned how to handle two attributes. Sisty can use at least two herself, maybe even three. Anyways, both ends are engraved with different attributes. Normally, having two different ones engraved on an AWR will cause them to interfere with one another... but not with this one. This special ring in the center of the rod prevents that. In addition to that, there are two separate channels for mana in its internal structure, so it can handle two types at the same time without them canceling each other out.”

Like he said, the rod could contain two types of mana without trouble, and its blades were also exceptionally sturdy. However, as the central ring was made from a special material and in a very precise manner, it wasn't suited for mass production.

Incidentally, the material was made from the tissue of a certain Fiend, with special chemicals used to keep it from dissipating.

From what they heard, this wasn't just some hand-me-down that should be used as a prize. Tesfia and Alice were so aghast, they even forgot to ask how much it cost to make.

"T-That's just cheating!!" Having come back to her senses, Tesfia shouted this with jealousy.

And Alice followed up with a question. "Are you sure it's all right to make this a prize in a shooting gallery, Al?"

"Like I said, this was just a prototype for your AWR. Since the completed version exists, I don't need this anymore. It's only going to get in the way here... but do you get it now? My laboratory is a veritable mountain of treasures!" Alus tended to let his fortune and talents do the talking for him, but it should be fine.

Seeing the two girls fall silent, Alus looked with satisfaction at Loki. She was seemingly convinced by his explanation and began focusing on making her scrunchie again.

"I think that scrunchie is fine. Expensive things aren't everything... in fact, even I'd want one of those." Alus put a hand on Loki's head, feeling like kicking himself. He might have meant it, but it did feel a bit clumsy. *I'm pretty awkward myself.*

That said, his attempt at smoothing things over was super effective. "Really?! T-Then I'll make a muffler for you for winter, will you accept that?"

"Y-Yeah... gladly."

The weather in the human domain was artificial, so while there was a winter, people rarely wore mufflers for it. But Alus decided to shake off that minor concern.

Three days now remained until the campus festival.

At first, the students figured they could slowly work on preparations until the day before, while planning how they'd enjoy the festival. So the fact that that blew up in their faces was entirely their own fault.

But unexpectedly, Alus got caught up in it as well. His laboratory had been scoured in the process of hunting for prizes a while ago. Fortunately, some supplies from the military—though who knew if it was all right to use those as prizes—had been dug up and submitted.

There were smokescreens and flash grenades, and supplies or not, they'd been given to the current ranked No. 1, meaning they were all top-of-the-line stuff. But he himself had no use for those kinds of accessories, so they just piled up. Since he hadn't used them so far, he likely wouldn't in the future either.

The students actually had no need for them right now either, but depending on the Institute's policies from here on out, they might see more time out in the Outer World. So there should be nothing wrong with students taking these with them.

After half a day spent treasure hunting, with scores big and small, they'd collected over 100 items. Of course, it was unlikely that all of them would be suitable for use as prizes, so whatever was left over would be returned.

Alus himself wondered where all of that stuff had been hiding. After coming to the Institute, he'd been playing around with a lot of things for some reason.

Tesfia and Alice, on the other hand, were more concerned with the monetary side of it. The AWR he'd given up for a prize was, without a doubt, as expensive as things could get. He'd called it advanced, but anyone with an affinity for it would be able to use it, so it would be helpful for students too. It came with a manual, as well as Budna's stamp of approval.

It would probably fetch 9,000,000 Deld, ten times the cost of regular AWRs sold on the market. Having been made with Double Digits in mind, price wasn't a consideration when it was being developed. For a Double Digit Magicmaster, however, it was the equivalent of three months' pay.

Incidentally, the cost of Alice's golden spear was 34,000,000 Deld. The price skyrocketed from its use of meteor metal.

The next most expensive item was an all-interference protective cloak made from anti-magic fibers. This wasn't something Alus made any adjustments to; the military had just sent a sample to him as thanks for benefiting from his research. It was a high-performance cloak compared to what was supplied to the common Magicmaster but was still a step down from what top-ranking Magicmasters received. However, those who could tell the quality from the limited-edition emblem of its makers would understand its worth.

Alus didn't like that it was white in color, and he'd never worn it even once for that reason. Its cost was 6,500,000 Deld, far higher than most of the military's protective gear. The reason was mainly the color. It wasn't dyed but instead used a special fiber that was naturally white.

The next excavation revealed a myriad of small anti-personnel AWRs. The majority of them were knife types with blades shorter than 30 centimeters. They'd been haphazardly stacked together, wrapped in a bundle of cloth, and shoved into the back of a cupboard.

When Tesfia and the others found them and unwrapped the cloth, their jaws dropped. The blades fell onto the desk and floor, making a lot of noise.

Like the rest, they were useless to Alus. They were the results of him trying different things to engrave more elaborate magic formulas. However, these weren't made for Double Digits. They only handled a single spell. Not a certain affinity, but a single spell. Of course, they weren't novice spells. The spells ranged from intermediate to advanced and even some expert level spells.

That said, they couldn't let magic formulas containing expert level spells be made public, so they'd been properly excluded from the prizes.

"Al, is this...?" Tesfia asked for an explanation. Among the small AWRs were, of course, spells that used the ice attribute. So it wasn't hard to tell what she wanted, as her trembling finger pointed at something. She was pointing at a knife that had a small plate on it that explained the knife had the magic formula for Niflheim. Unfortunately, there wasn't anything with light element spells that Alice could use.

“Give it up. You have that fine gem passed down in your family. Besides, you’ll learn that spell without having to rely on a thing like that. Single spell formulas can sometimes be more of a pain than attribute formulas. You’re far better off not relying on that thing. Okay?” Alus said, making his point. And he had a good reason for it.

An AWR that was only able to handle a single spell was certainly inconvenient, but that made its activation simpler. However, there was still a downside to oversimplifying things. If the caster got too comfortable with the simple method, their construction of the spell would rely too much on imagery rather than the proper process and detailed logic of the magic formula. As the performance of AWRs improved and the study of magic advanced, it had become an increasingly easy trap for Magicmasters to fall into.

And there was no way Alus would approve of something that pretty much denied everything Tesfia had learned in training so far. Though using images alone wouldn’t be enough to cast expert level spells, even if they were fully engraved on a magic formula.

“Yeah, I’m sure I’ll be able to do it soon.”

Alus hadn’t said anything about *soon*, but since Tesfia had calmed down, he decided not to correct her. “Well, there’s plenty of cases of an AWR breaking and becoming unusable in the Outer World. It would be useful as a backup for times like that. An AWR’s meant to assist a Magicmaster, though, so it would be strange to have a backup for your assistant... anyways, there’s nothing better than being able to use magic without an AWR at all.”

“But would only Singles like you be able to do that, Sir Alus?”

He shrugged at Loki’s question. “No, I don’t think even Singles would find it easy to use spells over the intermediate level without any incantation. Actually, I barely remember any incantations.”

Nobody here was particularly surprised by Alus’ confession. Because Alus had a perfect grasp of the components in various types of magic in his head, he could perform magic without incantations to different degrees depending on the spells.

“So, are you guys sure you can afford to go scavenger hunting in someone

else's room?"

"..." "

The room fell into an inexplicable silence.

"Ah! Noooo... How could this happen?" Tesfia screamed in an obvious fashion, earning her stares from Alus and Loki.

"Fia, let's give up..." Alice jumped on the bandwagon and consoled her.

It was obvious they'd hoped to get something in return for their scavenging in order to achieve their own quota.

The general principle was at least one prize per person, but anything that came out of Alus' room would be considered submitted by him. Be it 10 or 100, it didn't mean that Tesfia and Alice would be able to escape their own duty.

"Alright, you two, sit down right there!" Alus scolded the two for a little while. In short, he preached about how pathetic it was to always rely on others for everything.

While they appeared meek during his lecture, the moment it was over they hurriedly ran for the door, finally realizing they were pressed for time. Being at the top of their class, they couldn't afford to not submit anything.

Alus had to hope there was no one in the class who would defend that. After wordlessly watching them run out, he let out a heavy sigh and massaged the bridge of his nose again.

Unable to bear the sight, Loki stopped her sewing and stood up with an exasperated, "What hopeless people."

"Sorry about this."

"Not at all, this is part of my duty."

Alus gave her a questioning look. Loki was a hard worker, but he often felt she exceeded the scope of a partner. Well, it really was too late for that.

About an hour later, she returned with Tesfia and Alice in tow, surprising even Alus.

But when he saw the sewing kits and manuals in their hands, he realized he

had nothing more to say.

The next day, Alus went to one of the rooms at the Institute to take part in a security committee meeting.

The security council, also known as the security team, was composed of students. Their role was primarily to prevent trouble from happening, making them temporary disciplinary officers for the duration of the festival. They would also work together with the management committee if necessary. With there being only two days left, the security team gathered for a briefing.

In reality, the organization had already been up and running for a few weeks, and the rules and case examples had been hammered into its members.

The person in charge was Illumina Solsoleek. She would be head of security for the campus festival. She was not only skilled but was also a good friend of Felinella's. Felinella was the management committee chairperson, making them the optimal combination.

Since Illumina was always by Felinella's side, the impression she made was vague, but most knew how skilled she was. She was nobility but wasn't boastful about it. If anything, she was always calm, cool, and collected. For better or worse, she was known for not letting her feelings show.

Because of that, Alus' first impression of her was that she was competent. In fact, the patrol routes she created were well done.

The areas would be full of people, but he recognized that the plan ensured that the burden would be evenly distributed among the security team so they wouldn't overlap in areas of responsibility.

That said, the work itself was simple. If a dispute happened that was nothing more than an argument, the parties would get off with a warning. But if a violent conflict occurred that even involved magic, then the security team was allowed to use force.

So they would be permitted to carry their AWRs with them, but they had strict restrictions on the use of magic, with some exceptions. The use of magic was to be a last resort, and even if it was to hold back a mob, they'd need to

submit a report on the incident.

It was also important to confirm all matters first so that no blame could be placed on security. Not to mention, they would have to refrain from using AWRs as much as possible.

With this in mind, Alus looked over the patrol routes and reconfirmed his own job.

After finishing the briefing, Illumina readjusted her black-rimmed glasses, and spoke in a cool voice, “Alus, do you have any questions?”

Perhaps he’d had a sour expression on his face... Alus reluctantly opened his mouth. “Well, my patrol area is mostly in front of the main building and the training grounds...”

The Institute was divided into eight sections centered around the main building, and the patrol areas were split up among the security team members. One area was too big for a single person to patrol alone, so there would typically be five people for each area.

Alus’ area was no exception. But the problem was that it was the area expected to see the most traffic. The food stalls would be set up in front of the main building, and the training grounds would be packed during the mock battles. That being the case, selecting the most skilled for it was common sense.

So why was a first-year like Alus being put there? It was a question rather than a complaint. It didn’t add up to him.

“I see, that’s a good point. It was actually at the management committee chair’s request.”

The room was abuzz for a moment, while Alus’ expression soured even more. The male students, hearing that this was under the direct instructions of Felinella, gave Alus jealous stares, but he couldn’t give up his line of questioning here.

“But I’m still just a first-year. Wouldn’t there be some unease in leaving it to me? The area seems to be short on hands, too.”

“It should be fine, considering the show you put on at the tournament. It

should be clear to anyone who watched it, Feli and me included. I'm sure the burden on you will be considerable, going out there both in the morning and afternoon, but there will always be five people on the security team, with more off-duty people tending to their own class' stalls nearby. I believe there will be at least five in front of the main building, and four by the training grounds. Security will be wearing armbands even when off duty, so I hope you'll be fine with that."

In that case, even Alus had to accept it. Thinking about it, there would probably be a lot of off-duty security around, and he wouldn't be the only one covering both morning and afternoon shifts. "... I understand."

"Thank you for your understanding. Are there any other questions?" Illumina looked around with an expressionless face. It seemed nobody else had any objections. "Then, that's all for today. Remember to rely on the Consensors on the day of the festival. I'm sure there will be some unforeseen circumstances, but I'll be at headquarters ready to reassign you as quickly as possible if you need it."

With those as her closing remarks, Illumina handed out Consensors and armbands to the security team. It probably hadn't been intentional, but the armband had a very ostentatious design. As he gazed at it, Alus had the feeling that he'd be busier than expected.

As the meeting ended, he realized that there was a lot to do, but focusing on the campus festival for the moment would be best.

The students were leaving the room one after another, but a certain person approached him. "Thanks for today, Alus. Like I said before, I'm sure that it will be a burden on you, but I thank you for your patience," Illumina said, stone-faced. Depending on who you asked, she might have even looked pompous.

But having gotten an understanding of what kind of a person she was at the tournament, Alus didn't particularly mind. She might give off the look of an elite, but he knew she had a mild-mannered personality.

Everything she did was rational and logical. She tended not to be noticed because of Felinella's dazzling appearance, but she was quite the looker herself. She was just a bit unfortunate in that she lost out being in Felinella's shadow.

That was the frank, somewhat rude, opinion Alus had of her, but he wasn't going to say it out loud.

"Still, I can't tell why Feli is pushing such a heavy responsibility on you... Is that just how much she trusts you?" The way she spun around and sat down on the table edge was somewhat enchanting.

"Your guess is as good as mine. By the way, I heard that you two were childhood friends."

"Yes, we're kind of stuck together. But Feli's finally getting motivated as the management committee chair, and coming off of a win at the tournament, we can't let this year's campus festival end in failure," Illumina said with a smile. Her usual cool demeanor disappeared, making her look her age and even lovely. One couldn't just tell a book from its cover.

Having heard that much, Alus couldn't slack off anymore. "Right. In that case, I'll pitch in and help out too."

Illumina gave him a simple, "I look forward to it," in return.

Forty-Fifth Chapter

A Bizarre Candidate

The Second Magical Institute's campus festival was off to a spectacular start.

The gates opened for admission at 9:00 a.m., but there was a line waiting before that. This scene was almost a tradition at the festival.

Alus wasn't all that impressed at the thought of this crowd rushing in all at once at the start of the event. That said, he didn't have the time to complain.

As part of the security team, he reviewed his assigned patrol area again. His route went through the front of the main building that was packed with stalls and the area around the training grounds. Simply put, they were the locations that were going to be the most crowded.

Frankly, it was a pain, but after Illumina told him she wanted the event to be a success because Felinella was the management committee chairperson, he couldn't think of a good excuse to get out of the work. Not to mention that he couldn't refuse after seeing a rare smile on her usually expressionless face. And that was how he took on the job of security.

Right now, Alus was in front of the main building. After the gates opened, the crowd was expected to pour in here like raging bulls. "This is the front of the main building. I'm in position."

"Understood. The gates will open in five minutes."

Using the Consensor in his ear, Alus reported to Illumina, who was at the headquarters. He had the security armband on his right arm, and also had his AWR with him even though he probably wouldn't need it, but with these things he at least looked right for the job.

He'd drilled all the important points into his head, so his only remaining issue would be if any acquaintances from the military happened to see him like this. He could easily imagine them mocking him for becoming quite the diligent

student in the short time he'd been here.

Well, it was true that he'd contributed a lot to the class this time around. He was the one who'd fixed the lack of prizes problem for his class. But before his classmates could express their gratitude, they'd begun to rummage through the extravagant items, causing an uproar.

Not only were the prizes valuable, but they were also precious things that any Magicmaster would want, which prompted all kinds of speculation on Alus' origins.

Alus himself hadn't heard the rumors directly, but at some point him being ex-military had become the most prominent guess. Similar predictions had also been made about Loki, and this incident made it seem all the more probable.

Because of that, the disrespectful stares and blatant harassment of him had all but stopped. In fact, he'd been treated the opposite way lately, and it was all but confirmed among the girls that he was rather strong for a Magicmaster.

However, his rank was still being kept a secret. And his impression of a problem child who did poorly on tests, skipped out on classes, and was sometimes called to the principal's office remained unchanged.

Yet that rough side had started to be seen as mysterious instead, giving him an unapproachable atmosphere among his classmates. Of course, none of this mattered to the person in question.

Putting that tangent aside, having arrived at his post, Alus pushed away the thoughts of the visitors gathering at the gates to the side and turned his attention back to Illumina on the other end of the Consensor.

The next moment, she spoke up. "It's opening time. Please proceed as planned. Again, I would like to reiterate that you report any problems that occur right away." Her last report for everyone before the event began didn't require any answers.

Alus wordlessly stared in front of him. The gates slowly opened... and even though he'd mentally prepared himself, the sight that played out before him made his cheek twitch.

I thought they were told not to run.

The crowd was like a surge of energy to the extent that “surge” wasn’t enough to describe it. Even the security team members calling for their attention were swallowed up in the wave.

The ground rumbled, seemingly shaking the main building, and all the students manning the stalls flinched at the stampede.

In the blink of an eye, a flood of people was right in front of Alus, each person having their own goal, and they split into two around him.

One half headed to the main building. They probably wanted to look through the stalls one at a time starting from there.

The other group headed for the training grounds. There was still time before the mock battles began, but they were going to secure seats early.

The first hour of mock battles would see students fighting each other. And then, after a short break, anyone was free to join in.

Magicmasters and those who sought to become one were allowed to enter so the Institute could showcase its achievements and give a demonstration to anyone who was looking to join.

For example, quite a few students in Alus’ class year had joined because they admired Felinella, who’d fought in the Friendship Magical Tournament and in some mock battles during the campus festival. So it was no surprise that Tesfia, Alice, and Loki, who’d all been the stars of this year’s tournament, would be taking part in the mock battles.

It wasn’t unusual for a prospective Magicmaster to admire someone and set them as their goal. The ranking system also helped speed that up. Because of that, the area Alus was assigned to was indeed the most trafficked area of them all.

He spotted a girl looking like she might get crushed in the crowd and smoothly pulled her out of the human wave.

Next, he quickly supported an elderly person who looked like they might fall over after getting pushed.

These kinds of things happened one after another, so no one he helped even

had the time to thank him.

About an hour of this went by. Alus was working nonstop to assist visitors, when he received a report through his Consensor. It seemed an incident was taking place, and in response, he immediately rushed to the scene.

To him, no matter how crowded it might be, it wasn't enough to stop him in his tracks. He slipped through any gaps, taking the optimal route between people to reach his destination.

The location was a corridor in the main building, right in the middle of traffic. For some reason, two students were at each other's throats. One was an Institute second-year student. The other appeared to be from a different institute, judging from his uniform.

Both sides had already drawn their sword-type AWRs. Mana was running through the AWRs, so it was a very explosive situation.

Alus didn't particularly panic, simply relieved that he'd arrived before the situation turned even worse. "Security here, excuse me. What's the problem?"

The student from another institute had his back turned to Alus and ignored him, but the Second Magical Institute student was clearly flustered upon seeing him. They must have heard of Alus' accomplishments in the tournament. He'd thought his unintentional show of force had been a blunder, but it was unexpectedly helpful after all.

"N-No, it's nothing..."

The second-year student's fighting spirit had mostly disappeared, but the other student shouted out loudly without even turning to look Alus' way. "Don't you fucking call this nothing!! I said I'll pay! Me, the son of the Owen family! If you understand your place, then don't get in my way!"

Alus couldn't help but mutter, "Huh?" when faced with the boy's shouts.

That's when Ciel popped out from behind him, explaining the situation to Alus in a whisper, "I don't care if he's nobility or not, I don't like him... The truth is..."

But Alus didn't so much as turn around, as he raised his arm to interrupt her. "Sorry, but no matter the circumstances, drawing your AWR here is forbidden."

Indeed, he didn't even need to listen to Ciel's explanation. Using an AWR was forbidden outside of the training grounds. Normally, he could just take him in without question. But he didn't want to do anything too serious in front of the public. If they could settle this with talking, that would be best.

But the troublemaking noble scornfully laughed at Alus instead. "Shut up. I'm talking to this guy! You have nothing to do with this, so don't get in the way!"

Alus ignored him, turned to the second-year, and glared at him. Realizing his intentions, the mana in the second-year's AWR dispersed. He couldn't exactly overlook him, but he could still be excused, having de-escalated right away when told to. Probably, anyways.

Alus would normally never be so roundabout, but Felinella was the committee chair this time around. He could at least put some effort into it. "That won't happen. I'm security here. And you're causing trouble for the other visitors."

"I don't care who you are, but don't you dare talk to me like that!" The troublemaker gazed at Alus with contempt. His were the eyes of someone used to misusing his power, used to looking down on those around him. Those around him had surely seen this overbearing and insolent attitude a lot.

Which meant that Alus only needed to fulfill his duties. He spoke to the boy, polite on the surface... and determined on the inside. "It's a pain, but I'll have to follow procedure then. You give me no choice but to use force."

"You think the Owen family would lose to some Alpha coward? Give it your best shot! And learn your place!"

"Then I'll take you up on your words and do just that."

Without even waiting for Alus to finish his sentence, the boy slashed horizontally with his enchanted sword. It was a strike meant to take him by surprise, a dirty move for a noble, but he tried it on the wrong person.

The onlookers held their breath. Everything fell silent for a moment as if time had stopped.

Alus narrowed his eyes, calmly observing the unmoving sword. He'd raised up two fingers and caught the boy's sword between them.

“What?!”

Of course, only an idiot would try to catch an enchanted AWR with their bare fingers. His fingers were covered in a thin film of mana, so he hadn't stopped it with just brute strength.

And—the boy let out a pained yelp as his body snapped forward. Alus had driven his knee into his gut.

The troublemaker passed out, and Alus supported him with his arm before handing him over to the other security members that had rushed to the scene.

And so the incident was resolved. The second-year student that had dispersed his mana when Alus pressured him got off with just a warning. With the job done, Alus rubbed the nape of his neck as if wiping away some sweat.

The next moment, the onlookers burst into applause. Among them were many non-Magicmaster civilians. It was a good thing that it didn't turn into a big deal, but Alus was suddenly assailed by an unsettled feeling. Thinking about it, this might be the first time he received earnest praise from the general population.

That's when Ciel looked at him with a frown. When Alus finally noticed, he saw where they were standing. *This is my classroom, isn't it?* He felt a strange premonition as Ciel opened the door and entered the room.

“Do you want to listen now?” she asked, her head peeking out from behind the door. She wasn't happy over how he'd brushed her off earlier. Even her large adorable eyes had narrowed. She must have offered to explain out of kindness.

Alus answered her politely, realizing he should change his attitude. “I'm sorry. I need to get a good grasp of the situation for my report. Will you please explain?” He closed his eyes and lowered his head.

Seeing that, Ciel burst out, “I saw the whole thing!” and invited Alus into the classroom. The noble student from before had said something about how he'd pay. So it was probably related to some stall. Not to mention that it was Ciel who was trying to explain, and it had taken place in front of Alus' classroom, meaning... it was related to the shooting gallery. Realizing this, Alus couldn't

help but have a bad feeling about it.

When he stepped into the classroom, his eyes opened wide, and he froze in place. And of course he would.

It was just a shooting gallery, but business was booming... so perhaps the onlookers outside hadn't gathered because of the incident, but for the stall.

Alus had dropped by the other day while preparations were still being made, so he'd seen the shooting gallery before. The stall was set up so customers used the elevated podium that the teacher taught from, while the gallery utilized the space that the students normally occupied.

All the open space was used in full to display all of the prizes. The most valuable prizes were put in the hardest to reach places.

There was a system in place that graded the prizes on a five-step scale. Incidentally, it wasn't the prize itself that people shot at, but a plate next to the prize, which differed in size and weight depending on the difficulty.

The prototype AWR that Alus had supplied sat as the top-grade prize, but right next to it... was the white scrunchie hair tie that Loki made.

Sure, it was well made for a first try. But why was it next to his AWR...? Was that just how valuable Loki's handicraft was? That felt problematic, but Alus chose not to think too hard about it.

Setting that aside... one step lower, in the center, was a large furball-type object that looked like a coiling snake. Apparently this was the muffler that Alice made. It had probably been rolled up so the other prizes could be lined up next to it, but it was clearly long enough to wrap around your neck five times over.

But Alice's personality was shining through it, as it had been meticulously made. In short, despite being made by amateurs, these prizes were highly valued because they were handmade. Even lined up next to Alus' ludicrously expensive goods, he could grudgingly accept it.

He couldn't make any sense, though, of the bizarre item next to it. Considering where it was positioned, it must have been valued the same as Alice's muffler. *What is that thing?* Alus guessed it might be a stuffed animal. Or

at least he hoped it was.

But what kind of animal was it? He furrowed his brows, thinking. "A human...? No, it has some kind of animal ears... besides, each hand is a different length." The legs were also strange. It was just barely keeping its balance sitting up on the shelf.

He hesitated to call it a prize. To some it might have a daring underground feel to it, showing some sort of twisted artistic worth, but he had no idea of what.

It had an off-kilter shape with a hint of madness to it. It was probably sitting on all fours, but one of its hands was just unusually long, giving it an eerie look.

Ciel quietly watched Alus from the background with a wry smile on her face, as if she could tell exactly what he was thinking.

That's it, Alus suddenly realized. *I see, I guess this is the result of her studies.* He nodded to himself as he stared at the stuffed animal and spoke confidently. "Wow... to think she made a Fiend."

"Wrong!!" Ciel sharply corrected him.

... And Alus blurted out, "It's not?!" out of reflex. "Now, now, Ciel, there actually is a Fiend like this. It's pretty common in Alpha, and they bring it up in lectures too..."

"Geez, Alus, I'm glad Fia's not here right now." Ciel moved to Alus' side and whispered in his ear, "That's a dog. Or rather, a kind of wolf."

"You're kidding. In what world is that a wolf? Nobody's going to buy that."

Alus couldn't believe it, but when he turned to Ciel, she shrugged with a happy, gentle smile on her face. She'd thought Alus was perfect, so seeing an unexpected side of him was enjoyable.

But he had his reasons for being surprised. He'd seen a real wolf, though its breed had been through some improvements. And he compared that to this. No matter how he looked at it, the stuffed animal was just terribly made. It could hardly even be called an animal. *So that's why she never showed me the finished version. She sure is clumsy*, Alus muttered to himself.

Looking at it one more time, he tilted his head, unsure whether to be happy or exasperated. The shape aside, he couldn't help but think it was being overvalued just because Tesfia made it, considering the things he had provided. Were they saying this creepy stuffed animal was worth the same as his gems? The thought that even garbage would be valued highly if Tesfia made it scared him.

But that was what the campus festival was like. Since it was aimed at the male students who didn't know Tesfia's true side, he supposed it was fine in its own right.

After thinking about that for a moment, he quietly looked around the classroom and saw something that didn't quite match that thought. He'd vaguely noticed it when he first came in, but subconsciously turned away, hoping it was only his eyes playing tricks on him.

Alus could understand there being a lot of parents here with their kids at a shooting gallery, using the popular spell gun toys. He could also understand why there were so many male students here. They must've heard there were prizes made by three beauties... their goal was obvious.

But *this* simply made no sense.

Mixed in with the children and male students were adult men, all of them from the military, Magicmasters in fact. Actual adults were holding the toys, taking the game as seriously as they could, fully invested in the shooting gallery.

They looked like snipers ready to shoot their targets. With sweaty foreheads, they stood in a row taking aim.

When Alus saw they weren't after the girls' homemade crafts but the goods that he had supplied, he finally understood the situation. With a bitter stare he looked over at Ciel, who wore a triumphant expression.

"That's right. This is all because of the AWR you brought in being so popular." Ciel pointed not at the AWR itself but at a poster hung on the wall. It was sort of a prize catalog.

If you looked at the customers lined up at the shooting gallery, the situation could be described as a great success. There was a man who appeared to be an

AWR engineer, a well-built soldier, and even a senior student wearing a Second Magical Institute uniform. Of course, there were also students from other schools, like the troublemaker from before.

“I see. So that guy wanted to buy the prize he failed to get before.”

“Yeah. We refused, but he put up a lot of money and caused a commotion... then a senior student started complaining. And you know what happened after that.”

“Well, it is rather expensive. That said, it wasn’t intended to make a profit, so that was the correct response. If someone else starts acting unreasonable, contact security. I’ll be around here for a while.”

“Hehe, good work out there. Why not take a little break?”

“I can’t slack off now, can I?” Alus actually had a reason for wanting to wrap things up. He gazed around the classroom, then imagined the long line outside. *Even if I tried to take a break, they’d just ask me to help them.*

The shooting gallery was having a bigger turnout than expected, with eight classmates already sent to manage the line. If he fell for Ciel’s invitation here, he wouldn’t get the time to rest. Not to mention, he couldn’t afford to have people think he wasn’t paying attention to his security job.

Having concluded that, he told Ciel he’d do what he could and turned his back on her.

However—

A female student stood in front of the door, blocking Alus’ exit. He figured she was just another customer and stepped out of her way.

Ciel peeked over at her. “Oh, sorry. We will call you when there’s an opening.”

But she gave both of them an amused smile, following Alus with her gaze. “Oh, I’m not a customer.” The smile remained on her face as she locked eyes with Alus. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, my future senior.”

She elegantly bowed, at the same time grabbing the hem of her black dress in a curtsy. It was a sophisticated and alluring dress that accentuated the curves of

her body.

The girl had wavy, pearl-gray hair, with the tips curling under her chin. Two mounds pushed up her clothing, making it tight over her chest, embodying a woman's ideal proportions. Despite all that attractiveness, she still had a young girl's look.

Alus and Ciel glanced at each other, as if to confirm that this was the first time they'd met the girl. However, Ciel was also shocked by the words she'd said. "No way! You're younger than me?!" she blurted out.

The other girl didn't deny it. "Yes, I will be applying for the Second Magical Institute. I had the chance to see you in action at the Friendship Magical Tournament," she added, directing this at Alus and putting on a cheerful smile again.

Alus wasn't sure what to say. At times like these, the first thought that crossed his mind was that this was a pain in the ass. A bad habit of his. "... And you are?"

The girl gasped as she realized the situation and put her hand over her chest. It was a very noble gesture, showing her good upbringing. "Pardon me for not naming myself. I am Noir Valis Oud."



Regaining his composure, Alus, aware of his position as her senior, introduced himself. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Lady Noir." He met politeness in kind. It might have been the first time he'd done so since enrolling at the Institute.

However, he'd missed the second half of the tournament. If it was a matter of impression, Loki should have left a deeper one. Her view was plausible, though. Either way, it seemed the tournament had had a bigger influence than he'd thought. He could understand now why Berwick and Cicelnia were so set on winning it.

"There's no need to be so formal with me. Please just call me by my name. As you might have noticed, I am nobility, but just my name is fine," Noir pointed out with a small smile.

Alus nodded. "No...ir, unfortunately I am on security detail now, so I don't have time to spare." They might eventually attend the same institute, but he had some resistance to becoming familiar right away.

He also picked up on her somewhat peculiar atmosphere. For some reason, he wanted to avoid getting too close to her. "Another time, perhaps." He passed by her side and attempted to walk out the door when he felt a tug on his sleeve.

"Wait! Just a moment of your time, please. This is my first time here at the Institute, so I was hoping you could show me around..." When Alus didn't say anything, Noir put on a mischievous smile. "Don't tell me you'd ignore a younger girl's request, Alus." It was clear as day that she was enjoying the situation.

Ciel's gotten used to me in a bad sense as well, he thought to himself. Was it someone else's influence, or was this just how she actually was? Either way, this Noir girl was getting too close for comfort. Then again, considering the crowd, he could understand her wanting a guide.

"Ms. Noir, sorry, but I'm in the middle of work." When Alus refused, he felt like he was receiving glares from those around them. Surely that was just his mind playing tricks on him? Perhaps from an onlooker's perspective, he'd curtly refused an elegant and dainty girl's request.

“Can’t I get you to change your mind, somehow... please?” Sensing that the people around them were on her side, Noir pressed the matter. She shook off her disappointed look and gave him a daring smile, with a hint of desperation, as she asked him one more time.

Of course, Alus had his own circumstances to deal with, so her request was just unreasonable. But having made himself an enemy of the public around them, he no longer had an escape.

He sighed. “Fine. Then I’ll check if it’s okay to leave my post... and if it’s not, you’ll just have to give up.” He let out another sigh and turned his back on her, putting his finger on the Consensor.

Shortly thereafter, he turned around again with drooping shoulders. “I’ve got 20 minutes...”

“Thank you very much,” Noir said, smiling brightly.

Seeing this, Ciel nodded in satisfaction.

Illumina was known to be straight-laced, so her consent came as a surprise. Alus had run out of luck when he told her it was a noble who was looking to enroll next year that wanted an escort.

Surely the smattering of applause Alus heard was his mind playing tricks on him again. There were some jealous stares mixed in, but maybe that was unavoidable, considering who he was dealing with. She had adult proportions, and the word beautiful suited her better than cute.

Alus shook his head, and with Ciel seeing them off, they walked down the hallway as if it were a makeshift wedding aisle.

Incidentally, with the short period of time they had, there was no way Alus would be able to guide her through the entire Institute, so he’d need to narrow down the places to show her. But when he asked where she wanted to go, he only got a vague response in return.

That made him wonder if she had any serious interest in the Institute or not, but she did say it was her first visit. In that case, she could be forgiven for not knowing a lot about it. Though it would help if she could at least point him in a direction.

And so, he decided to give her a tour of the main building, and then follow up by heading over to the research building.

Starting with the main building, Alus gave her explanations as they walked along, but as he spoke, he realized that he wasn't all that familiar with the Institute himself. He'd stumble for words, but Noir kept a smile on her face.

Suddenly, he realized something. "Noir, do you practice martial arts or some competitive sport? I was just thinking that you don't have an amateur's footwork. I don't think saying it's part of the etiquette of a noble family would be an excuse."

Noir's eyes opened wide. Maybe she was surprised, as her tone of voice sounded stiff. "How impressive. Would you mind if I asked how you noticed?" Her smile had disappeared.

"Well, you don't make any unnecessary noise, and the way you shift your center of gravity is very smooth. You should pass the practical portion of the entrance exam with flying colors."

"I certainly hope so."

"Your mana will be measured to test your aptitude for becoming a Magicmaster. But I'm sure it'll be fine," Alus said, but since he'd enrolled without any exams, he didn't actually know the details. He'd heard it was difficult. Even with all that, though, he felt that the way Noir moved her feet reflected a high degree of skill.

He wrapped up his tour of the main building. But before they went to the research building, they stopped by the auditorium. The cafeteria next to the auditorium was open for business as usual. It was also lunchtime, so it was somewhat crowded.

After a quick look around the cafeteria, the two went to the upper floors. Here there were spaces for meeting and chatting, as well as training rooms for the students.

But right now... "There are quite a few people here," Alus observed.

"So it seems. What's happening?"

This was the biggest hall in the Institute. “It looks like the principal is explaining the Institute to the legal guardians of potential students,” Alus said. “Based on the timing, it’s probably the third time she’s done it.”

“That’s a lot of potential students.”

“Yes. There’s been a lot of changes this year, so the explanation probably covers those too. Do you want to listen in? It should be helpful if you’re going to enroll next year.”

Noir was lost in thought for a moment. When she was thinking with such a blank expression, that pale, well-shaped face of hers looked like a doll’s face. “You’re escorting me now, so I think I’ll pass for today. I can always hear it some other time.”

“Right.” Alus had hoped to get rid of her here... but it seemed he’d have to give up on that. He glanced at the wall clock, and the two left the auditorium behind.

When they arrived at the research building, they went to the exhibition hall. On display were the research results of student groups under teacher guidance. The two looked over the exhibits, but when they got to a room on the third floor, Alus noticed something odd.

Upon entering the room, his eyes were drawn to a certain man. The man had a clean and stylish formal appearance. But the way he gazed at a specific display on the wall with a fire in his eyes was abnormal.

He doesn’t look like a Magicmaster. Who is he?

Among the twenty or so visitors, upon closer inspection, Alus saw another two people that stood out as not looking like Magicmasters or researchers.

One of them was standing next to the first man. The third was some distance away from the other two. The strange thing about the first two was that they seemed to become aware of each other at the same time, as if there was some timing involved.

The exhibition had all kinds of things from delicate machinery to new military equipment to prototype AWRs. There were even new magic circuits that made use of artificial mana, which was a great academic and military presentation for

the students.

Photography was forbidden in the exhibition. There were also rope dividers set up to keep the exhibits from being touched.

Suddenly, the sharply-dressed man leaned over the divider. He brought his face close to a strange orb on display and let out an impressed sound.

Alus stopped in his tracks, his nerves on alert. And sure enough, in the next instant, a loud clatter rang out. The man who'd leaned forward must've gotten caught on something, as the rope dividers fell over each other.

Seeing the man fall backwards, a noisy chatter erupted from the guests.

Alus sighed. "Sorry, Noir. Give me a moment." Normally he wouldn't do anything. It was just an accident, and it wasn't like the exhibit had been damaged. Indeed, this sort of event would usually end with nothing more happening.

However, he still chose to use a more forceful method. Moving up to the man in the blink of an eye to secure the scene, Alus said, "Sorry, but you'll have to accompany me to security headquarters. Of course, you're free to resist, if you like."

"W-Who the hell are you?!"

Alus twisted the arm of one of the mysterious duo who stood next to the man who'd fallen over.

"This is unreasonable. I haven't done anything!" The man insisted on his innocence by shouting and attracting attention. But once Alus pried his hand open, revealing what was inside, the onlookers' stares turned hostile.

It was a piece of magic equipment used in a precious new technology. It wasn't allowed to be photographed, let alone touched, and would likely fetch a high price. So the man's crime was obvious.

Alus then took the man's other arm, holding both arms behind his back, and scooped up the evidence.

The man spun around and took a swing at Alus' face. Seeing as he dislocated his arm to do it, he was no amateur even if he wasn't a Magicmaster. He was

clearly used to this kind of fighting.

There were a few guards stationed at the research building, but they probably wouldn't have been able to handle it. Especially considering the skills these people used to steal and their ability to force their way through even when restrained.

Alus decided that even if he were to dodge the attack, it would take an extra amount of effort. Moreover, breaking his arms or legs to prevent his escape would be unwise in such a big crowd. Security or not, he was still a student, and he didn't want to damage the exhibit.

That said, it would be a pain if he used magic. The man might not be a Magicmaster, but Alus wasn't going to let his guard down around someone this suspicious.

He lightly interfered with space, as he deflected the man's fist. When he did so, the man's fist that should have been only somewhat parried suddenly changed its trajectory, as if it had hit a sturdy wall.

With his stance broken, the man staggered. Yet he immediately tried following up with another attack.

However, Alus was pressed for time and didn't let him. He swept his legs out from under him, and when the man was in midair, grabbed his collar and drove him headfirst into the floor to knock him unconscious.

Alus' attention immediately shifted to the other person who'd appeared unrelated at first. This one was secretly cooperating with the man Alus captured. He'd stayed at a distance through the whole incident and was now trying to make his escape.

Standing at the entrance he was hurrying towards was Noir. She stood there like Alus told her to and just happened to be in his way.

With bloodshot eyes and frustration in his voice, he growled at Noir, "Move!"

Since he was an accomplice to the man Alus had caught, it made sense to assume he had similar skills. Leaving the unconscious man on the floor, Alus tried to get to Noir to help her, but...

Noir didn't so much as try to get out of the man's way. Instead, she stepped right into his path. "Where might you be going? You're in on it, aren't you?" she said with an unfaltering smile.

When he understood Noir was purposefully standing in his way, the man sneered and looked down at her. He shook his sleeve with a small movement, and a knife-type AWR fell out, landing in his hand. Wordlessly, the man constructed a spell while hiding his hand inside his sleeve, smoothly closing the distance to Noir.

But the man found himself unable to stab her in the abdomen as he'd planned. He couldn't even cast the spell he'd readied. Instead, he felt like his world was spinning.

Before the man knew it, Noir had grabbed his wrist with both hands and used his momentum against him to throw him.

He looked like he would crash headfirst into the floor like Alus had done to the first man, but he continued to spin and was neatly dropped on his feet. He was then poked in the back of his knees, forcing him to sit on his knees without even realizing what had happened.

Standing behind him, Noir's smile turned obscene. Her cheeks were a light red as she twisted his arm. She covered his eyes with her hand and whispered something.

Before long, the man's lips began trembling, and he dropped the knife.

Finally, Noir spread out the fingers of her hand that covered his eyes like a magician, and the man's entire body shook as he hung his head low.

Once that was done, Noir searched his body and found another stolen exhibit that he'd taken at the same time the first man committed his theft. She then gleefully held it up for Alus. "I got it back!" Not paying any heed to the dumbfounded crowd around them, Noir turned her joyful glance on Alus alone.

Alus was relieved to see she was safe. "Right, now it's your turn. Bring out that thing you put in your pocket and come with me to security headquarters. Once those two start to talk, you'll be exposed anyways," he told the sharply-dressed man who'd fallen over.

The man must have fallen over on purpose to create a scene, giving the other two a chance to steal the goods. He too was involved in the wrongdoings here. Seemingly giving up, the man pulled out two small cameras from his pockets. The two men had apparently delivered these to him before they committed their own crimes. Then they'd distanced themselves from one another and timed their thefts.

In other words, while those two stole the items, the sharply-dressed man secretly took photos. All three of them were working together. And as long as any one of them could escape, it would've been enough.

In fact, Alus believed the two thieves were a distraction, and their capture was probably considered acceptable. From his point of view, it was the designs that were valuable. Even if they had the parts, they wouldn't understand the inner workings.

Being as large a nation as it was, Alpha had its fair share of corporate spies. But the man Alus captured used strange martial arts, and the man who'd rushed Noir even brought out an AWR to use magic. It was rare to see spies being so combative.

Regardless, it wasn't Alus' job to deal with. So he called a nearby security member over and instructed them to bring reinforcements.

The first captured man spoke up in frustration. "You're pretty skilled for a student."

"That doesn't matter. Just tell me who hired you." Alus didn't so much as listen to him, as he curtly demanded an answer.

"..."

But his answer was silence. It seemed these men were professional criminals. So it probably wasn't going to be easy to make them talk.

"You don't know when to give up, do you?" Noir uttered with a chilling smile, as she slowly walked over to the man. She bent down, putting her hand on her chin as she stared into the man's face, before her expression contorted into a sneer. "Don't you think so?"

"—!!" The man's face twitched, his body stiffening...

... But Alus stopped her with a hand on her arm. “Sorry, Noir... but could you wait a minute?” It wasn’t like he was worried she’d get hurt. If anything, he felt it would be a good idea to keep her away from the men for their sake.

All he had to do was hand the men over to security. While he was on the Consensor, he contacted Illumina to enhance security around his classroom as well. It was filled with precious items like the prototype AWR, after all. It wasn’t so much the AWR itself, but rather the technology inside of it that might be valuable to corporate spies.

But Illumina said, “You don’t have to worry. We’ve already received the information. All done by the book, of course.”

He didn’t quite follow what she meant, so he gave her a vague reply, but it seemed he wouldn’t have to worry about the same thing happening elsewhere.

Once he was done with his conversation, Alus was greeted by a waiting and fidgety Noir. “Did I mention that I saw your match in the tournament?”

“Yeah,” Alus casually replied. But he felt a cold sensation run down his spine at her next words.

“So... What is your affinity?” Noir calmly smiled, as if poised for the answer. Despite her soft demeanor, her stare fixed Alus in place.

She hadn’t enrolled at the Institute yet. So she shouldn’t have any professional insight into the field of magic. He’d thought of her as nothing more than a prospective student, but it appeared he’d been naïve.

The magic Alus used to repel the thief’s attack didn’t have an affinity. He’d used spatial coordinates to create an invisible force field that deflected the attack. But even if you saw it firsthand, it wasn’t something a normal person would be able to tell.

Alus wasn’t careless enough to let someone who wasn’t even a novice Magicmaster yet catch on to his magic. Even if the man that threw the punch was a Magicmaster, even he shouldn’t have been able to see through it.

“... Well, I’m sure you’ll find out if you get the chance,” Alus told Noir vaguely, with some sarcasm mixed in, trying to emphasize the unspoken rule among Magicmasters that one shouldn’t pry into others’ magic.

“That’s true. I’ll figure it out eventually.” Noir gave an unexpectedly understanding answer.

It took the wind out of Alus’ sails, but at the same time, he found her interesting.

Speaking of which—after Noir had splendidly dealt with the second thief’s attack—his soul seemed to leave his body when she covered his eyes. Also, she already had an understanding of the unspoken rule between active Magicmasters.

It was this mysterious side of Noir that left an impression on Alus, rather than the strange actions she’d performed on the thief. Truly, it was frightening in a sense.

Eventually it was time for the tour to restart. And Noir’s mood seemed lighter than before. But it wasn’t as if she’d forgotten what happened. “By the way, Alus, are you familiar with martial arts?” She casually let her gaze wander, as she deliberately took a step beyond the unspoken rule.

Alus decided to at least give her an answer. Of course, he didn’t reveal his affinity, nor was his answer particularly witty. “Well, just a little. Although I suppose you could call it self-taught. I don’t think observing it in action would be of any help.”

“Oh, how modest. Though I don’t think that an ordinary student could master that kind of skill.” This was a sharp observation, but perhaps Noir had mastered martial arts too. “On top of that... you also seem familiar with how to destroy the human body,” she muttered.

Alus answered with a wry smile, as if to deny this disturbing and gloomy truth. “Oh, not at all. Even Magicmasters need more than just magic to survive in this world, so you have nothing to lose from training your body.”

“Hmmm,” Noir murmured, tilting her head. There seemed to be some confusion in her eyes.

Alus began feeling uncomfortable, as if his mouth was moving on its own, but nevertheless, for some reason, he became a little more talkative. Even though he was feigning friendliness, it was unusual for him to speak this much with

someone he'd only just met.

But the fact that he had to escort Noir in the first place was something that couldn't be helped. Not to mention that he'd received Illumina's approval, so he had to play the role of a friendly senior, which prompted his tongue to loosen more than usual.

As they walked, their conversation gradually drifted away from the Institute and turned into Alus talking about himself, like how he thought and felt about certain events.

He felt a haze coming over his thoughts. The atmosphere turned vaguely sweet, and he could feel his mood improving. Eventually, he even forgot about the time as he held a lively chat with Noir.

Before he realized it, Alus was standing at the Institute gates. He was just about to say goodbye to Noir.

"Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule."

"Don't worry about it, I enjoyed it too." Alus waved as he saw her off.

There were still plenty of people waiting to be let into the Institute, yet Noir stopped, interrupting the flow, and gave Alus a deep bow.

Even after that, she'd look back from time to time as if she was reluctant to go, until eventually she was swallowed up in the crowds.

Alus turned around and shrugged. "What a strange girl." She'd left a bit of an impression on him for a noble.

But the next moment, he thought about the nobles gathered around him, and a smile naturally formed on his lips. *So that's what it is.*

The proverb about birds of a feather wasn't lost on him.

Forty-Sixth Chapter

Tens of Thousands of Hostages

The first day of the campus festival was a massive success, seeing the highest number of visitors ever recorded, with men and women of all ages taking part.

The campus grounds were normally too large for the Institute to use effectively, but not today. However, the bigger the success, the more cracks formed in security. And by now the event was so large scale that it was impossible to keep watch everywhere.

With the Godma Barhong incident earlier in the year, and the increased number of visitors from the other nations, the military had poured more Magicmasters into security for the campus festival than ever before. They secured the outer perimeter and also blended in with the general crowd. Fortunately, there were only a few highly popular spots, and places not used for the festival were roped off with entry being forbidden.

That said, the areas outside of the buildings were packed, meaning it was possible for children to get separated from their parents by the flow of people. There were also a lot of people falling in the crowd and getting hurt, so there were many heading over to the infirmary.

In the midst of all the noise and festive atmosphere, *that* blended in as if it was a matter of course.

That was a figure dressed in a large robe covering their entire body. Considering how the climate was artificially controlled in the human domain, it would be a stretch to call it just a thick layer of clothing.

Wearing the large robe was a girl who made use of her small size to weave through the crowds. If she was lost, there didn't seem to be anyone looking for her.

Eventually, she picked up speed after leaving the main area and veering off

into a side street. She even crossed over a rope denying access to the rest of the Institute, jogging to a less hectic area of the grounds. Before long, the hustle and bustle of the festival was a distant echo in the background, and the main building was so far away you could only see the top of its roof.

“Well, I didn’t think it would be so easy. I guess they led me on, or I should say, set me up. I never should’ve listened to the drivel of the dead,” the girl spat out in a complaining tone, as she stopped in a grove.

“Young lady, you’re not allowed in here,” a kind woman’s voice called out to the girl.

In that instant, the girl quietly clicked her tongue and spun around to face the owner of the voice. She now wore a timid and helpless expression fit for a child of her age. “I-I’m sorry, I got lost,” she said in a cute tone.

When she heard that voice, the slender young woman that called out to her showed a gentle smile. She had golden hair, and her bangs covered one of her eyes.

She appeared pleasant, but the moment the girl saw the young woman’s eyes, her stare turned sharper. Her expression became stern, as if she found it all foolish, and immediately gave up on her girl act. “I didn’t think there’d be any security out here... but now I get it. You’re a Magicmaster from Alpha, and rather skilled.”

Meanwhile, the young woman likewise dropped her gentle act and glared back at the girl. “That’s former Magicmaster, but you’re not wrong. I doubt you didn’t know that this place is under the military’s direct control.”

“That doesn’t matter to me.”

“I’ve had my eye on you since you were in the main area because your attitude was so suspicious. I don’t know who you are, but I won’t let you do as you please.”

The girl, Elise, narrowed her eyes in surprise for a moment, before slightly shaking her robe as she observed her opponent. If she knew her identity, she wouldn’t have that kind of attitude. Since the young woman wasn’t calling for backup right away, it didn’t look like she was just pretending she didn’t know

who Elise was either.

I see. So the information on me didn't reach the lower echelons of security, or they weren't told. Heh, either way it's convenient for me.

Elise was a wanted first-class criminal, but detailed information on her wasn't widely known. But even after a series of events, including a fight against Jean Rumbulls in the shadow of the Balmes incident, it seemed the situation remained the same. Perhaps they didn't want to let information carelessly slip and have those without talent make a move on her—and end up dead—or maybe they didn't want to spread information on Elise and her appearance, lest she go underground again.

In any case, it looked like the woman was speaking the truth, and she wasn't even active-duty military. “Did you think that would make me back down? The world's not that simple,” Elise spat out, focusing on the noises she could hear around her. “If we seriously fight here, just how many people will die?” A crude smile, unbecoming of her looks, appeared on her face.

“I don't know the details behind it, but it seems you're not as young as you look. But you won't do anything at this institute, so the answer is zero!” the young woman shouted, closing the distance to Elise in a single step, shaking the hair out of her face.

She pivoted on one leg, bringing a diagonal kick downwards with enough force to split Elise's body in half.

Elise dodged the kick by lowering her head and taking a half-step forward, reaching out towards the young woman's face with her right hand.

However, her line of sight was sent in another direction as the young woman acknowledged the incoming danger and turned away, her leg returning for another blow. “A two-step preparation, huh.” Elise caught the leg with her left hand.

A flash of surprise appeared on her opponent's face, and Elise didn't miss it. As expected, she hadn't known who she was fighting. At the very least, she must have thought of Elise as some thug misusing magic.

The young woman was experienced, but her attack just now was simply

physical. If she knew anything about Elise, she would have gone all out from the start, and it still wouldn't have been enough. Once she realized her attack had been recognized and Elise's right hand came for her again, she spun on her pivoting leg to bend her body out of danger.

But when she did, an unbelievable amount of pressure came from Elise's small hand and clamped down on her leg. It had been a simple contest of strength, and once Elise let go of the young woman's leg, she jumped far back.

Meanwhile, Elise's calm atmosphere disappeared. "You weren't monitoring me, were you?"

The young woman, in the midst of getting some distance from her, couldn't tell who Elise was addressing. She didn't realize it until she landed and heard a voice behind her.

"That's a dead womaaaaan."

"—!! Another... one..." The young woman felt a heavy impact to the back of her neck, and in the next instant she lost consciousness, falling forward.

"Don't finish her off," Elise quietly said. "It'll be a pain later."

"I know, Ms. Elise. Well, I wouldn't get upset over being treated like a dead person either. But that aside, I'm surprised that you really came here. It's unusual for someone as careful as youuu."

Elise kept her guard up, as she stared in the direction of the slow speaking and strangely carefree figure, before saying bluntly, "I haven't gotten senile enough to actually listen to your bullshit. Besides, I don't have time for this. I only came here to confirm how much of a threat he is to Kurama. Though I guess I stood out too much."

"Weeeell, I'll just leave it at that." The figure finally came out from the grove, wearing a smile, and Elise properly faced her.

Contrary to what she'd said, the bullshit wasn't completely unrelated to her. At the very least, she could take advantage of a dead person's rambling if it gave her the opportunity to wipe out her past that was shrouded in darkness.

There were lingering regrets... and even now the intricately intertwined

events of her past remained as an unfaded mark in the depths of her heart. As a result, just hearing the name of Alpha was enough to bring out a strong disgust and everlasting abhorrence in her.

Perhaps that was why... she had stepped foot in this nation where the ranked No. 1 lived.

However, Elise decided to press her point. “Don’t forget that you’ll always be on the outside begging for your life. I won’t forgive anyone who turns their fangs on me no matter the circumstances, and I always finish them off. And I will make you pay for failing to finish off the ranked No. 3.”

“Yes, I won’t miiiiind. That’s why I’m exposing my real body like this.”

Considering the way she was talking, it was hard to tell if she was sincere or making fun of Elise. After all, the way she looked now was nothing like she did before. So it was only natural Elise would feel something was off.

“Well, no matter. I don’t know why you brought it up, but I’m sure you won’t mind if I kill you,” Elise said sarcastically, turning her back on Dakia Agnois as if to say that their conversation was over.

Dakia was acting innocently and freely, like she was just another guest visiting the campus festival. Her attitude bothered Elise more than usual this time around. She didn’t want to admit it, but it was possible that she had what Elise wanted... freedom. Which was why Elise had put it so maliciously, trying to dampen her spirits. Yet—

“Yes, if possible. Please doooo.” Even that sentence from Dakia sounded nonchalant.

Elise clicked her tongue. She felt like her verbal lashing was completely sidestepped. She didn’t think Dakia seriously believed that she would kill her. She was a hard to read woman. But that also cast doubt on whether or not this was really her true body.

Dakia, showing no concern for Elise’s inner conflict, casually disappeared back into the grove.

When she was like that, Elise couldn’t get a read on her whatsoever. With an indignant expression, she glared at Dakia as she faded into the distance.

But the next moment she forgot all about her and pulled her hood down over her eyes. Dakia's intentions didn't matter anymore. She only had to do what she came here to do.

After parting ways with Noir, Alus returned to his position in front of the main building.

He glanced at the stalls, then put his hand on the Consensor in his ear, feeling he should at least make a report. But before that, he looked up at the large clock on the main building to confirm the time.

—! *It's already been this long?* Alus groaned as he realized how much time he'd spent escorting Noir. It was only supposed to take twenty minutes, but he'd gone another twenty minutes over that. He realized he should probably apologize to Illumina. *Still, if I was going over the time, they could have just contacted me.*

With that thought in mind, he waited for a response and got one before long. "Illumina? I'm sorry, I just finished guiding the prospective student."

"We finally got in touch with you. Alus, you did a good job earlier, but what happened after that was not acceptable. You can't remove your Consensor during a mission. Please be more careful in the future."

"Uh, right." Alus went with the flow, but he didn't know what she was talking about. He had no memory of removing his Consensor, either. And he'd even given a report to Illumina after capturing the thieves.

However... before Alus could question her...

"Mr. Alus."

Alus groaned internally. But it wasn't directed at the girl who'd called out to him from afar. Strictly speaking, it was towards the first-class danger posed by her abundant chest bouncing up and down. "Feli... Ms. Feli?" he corrected himself, as he was still in the middle of a call.

Felinella was running towards Alus from the main building with a bright smile on her face.

The men around them were all gazing at Felinella... or rather at a specific part of her body. Bouncing breasts were just something that attracted men. Incidentally, Felinella was dressed the same as usual in her Institute uniform. But it was rare to see someone like her, always focused on behaving like a noble lady, running and out of breath.

This was the first time Alus had seen her like this. A comfortingly sweet smell that would surely knock out even the strongest of boys was coming from her glossy black hair that blew about in the wind.

The vision of a beautiful girl running under the heated gaze of the men was like an image from a fine art painting, as if time itself had stopped.

Finally, after a short yet long-seeming time, Felinella reached Alus and fixed her appearance while catching her breath. Alus couldn't understand nobility that would care about how they looked after running like that.

"Mr. Alus, do you have a moment?"

"Uh, no, I'm still on guard detail."

"—!!" Felinella was clearly disheartened and turned away slightly when she heard Alus' curt reply. "But I finally got some time to spare..." She tried to hide her disappointment, but her honest words leaked out anyway.

Alus couldn't help but feel uncomfortable seeing her like that. Even Illumina on the other end of the Consensor seemed to have picked up on the situation, as she let out a heavy sigh.

"Alus, could you hand me over to Feli?"

"S-Sure," Alus said, obediently removing the Consensor from his ear and handing it to Felinella. Her face looked a little red when he did so, but it must have been his eyes playing tricks on him.

"What, Illumina?"

"Alus was just about to return to guard duty."

"Come on, don't be like that. Just for a little bit."

"Do you expect that to work?"

“I adjusted the management committee schedule so that it would. The rest is up to you, Illumina. The security committee only needs to work with our committee a little, you just need to be a little more cooperative, right?”

Alus silently observed their conversation. They really were best friends, with Felinella’s words towards Illumina being refreshingly frank.

“You’re too brilliant sometimes...” Illumina complained.

“Hm? What?”

“Fine. We’ll handle it somehow! But you better be prepared since you’re shifting the burden onto us.”

“All right, all right.”

Illumina sighed. “If I recall, Alus hasn’t had lunch yet, so thirty minutes tops! And make sure you feed him.”

Felinella happily answered Illumina. “I don’t resent you for giving a rationale for everything you decide.” She giggled, but Illumina responded by hanging up on her.

It seemed some kind of deal had been made. Looking at Felinella’s expression as she handed back his Consensor, Alus decided not to think too hard about it.

“Mr. Alus, have you had lunch yet?”

“Oh yeah, I guess I never had time for it.”

“Then why don’t we have lunch together? Illumina even gave her approval.”

Alus wasn’t exactly hungry, but he couldn’t bring himself to say that out loud.

In the end, Alus was taken away by Felinella grabbing his hand, so it looked like it would be some time before he could return to his guard duty.

Most of the stalls in front of the main building were students selling food. But it wasn’t just limited to that area. The road to the auditorium was also lined with stalls. These stalls were operated by local restaurants, so they offered a more professional menu. It cost more in return, but this was a festival for students, and they were only expensive when compared to the students’

menus.

Thanks to that, there were quite a few long lines for the stalls run by the restaurants. The most popular stalls sold dishes like okonomiyaki and takoyaki, followed by thinly cut vegetables and kebabs. The stall selling skewers was also popular and had a long line of people waiting. As for dessert, bite-sized cookies and small pudding dishes were selling well.

The student stalls were generally cheap and casual, while the pro stalls competed with quality.

Donuts that utilized plenty of cream or fruits were also a hit with the ladies. Not to mention that even at this time of year, ice cream and other cool desserts were as popular as ever. With the weather being artificially controlled, the temperature never really got too cold.

“Then, shall we go?” Felinella had a delighted look on her face, as she pulled on his hand without even waiting for his answer. “We don’t have much time, so why don’t we eat something to recharge?”

“...” Half-hearted replies weren’t allowed, so Alus gave up and answered with a tight smile.

Felinella had pretty much promised to make a move on him in the past. If this was related to that—Alus had said he would meet her with the firmness of a fortress.

Maybe that was exaggerating a little, but in truth, he didn’t have much intention to do so. His dry smile might have been a fortress, but it was one with its gates flung open... it was a sign of his resolve to face Felinella’s offensive without a solid defense.

This was probably that kind of invitation in the first place. And while he was being pulled by the hand, it couldn’t be called forcible. She might have been hesitant to fully abandon her ladylike dignity to be more assertive, as her hand was gently guiding him. She was unable to selfishly follow through with her own needs... no matter what she might say, she was still a girl.

And Alus could more or less understand that. Perhaps because she was like that, he had left the gates to his fortress unlocked.

Felinella may have worn a calm and gentle smile on the surface, but she was anything but calm on the inside. She was writhing in shame, scared that Alus would be able to hear the sound of her wildly beating heart.

However, that struggle fit for a girl of her age only lasted a moment. She composed herself by the time they arrived at their first destination, and she looked over at Alus, only to see him nodding.

“Excuse me, can we have two of these?” Felinella said, ordering from a first-year student with a big smile on her face.

The stall sold regular yakisoba. But despite being run by students, the student in charge of cooking was the son of a famous restaurateur, so the taste was no different from a professional’s stall. Yet it was priced the same as student fare, making it a secretly popular spot.

“M-M-Ms. Socalent!! T-Two, is it? O-Okay!!” Perhaps unfortunately, it was a male student who was running the stall at the moment. Unable to look Felinella directly in the face, he cast his eyes down, only to have them stop at a particular place on her body. Before long, his face turned red as an apple, and he bowed at a speed that looked like his head might come off, as he loudly apologized for his rudeness.

Felinella looked at him suspiciously. “I’m not sure what’s wrong. But I’m sorry, we don’t have much time...” she said to hurry him on.

Those words sent the male student into a rush as he hurriedly began cooking, mixing noodles with the other ingredients. Actually, he already had finished yakisoba at hand, but he wanted to make it as fresh as possible for her.

Meanwhile, Felinella smiled and turned to Alus. “This was a rather popular stall on the questionnaire, so I’m sure it will taste great.”

“I see.” Alus could only give an absentminded reply because he wasn’t very big on food, and the yakisoba on the menu was a commonplace item. That said, there were several yakisoba stalls, and this one was very popular, so perhaps that should raise his expectations a little.

But even that was trivial from Alus’ point of view. If he received nutrition and alleviated hunger, the taste didn’t matter. Lately, however, his taste had

become more discerning... perhaps thanks to Loki's cooking.

Alus quietly looked over his surroundings and furrowed his brows. He knew how popular Felinella was, but he didn't expect things to get so noisy just because she'd shown up. It was like a guest of state or national figure had appeared. He could hear the sound of people whispering around them.

And as he figured that this stall would only get busier, he heard something he couldn't ignore.

"Isn't that a first-year? He was in the tournament."

"Why is he with Felinella?"

The voices of two girls gossiping reached his ear. At this rate, it would only be a matter of time before Felinella and Alus became a scandal.

The next moment, the male student cooking their lunches timidly asked Felinella, "Uhm, would the other one be for..."

"Yes, of course." Felinella's smile was in full bloom, overpowering the ominous shadows around her.

"I-I see... he, he... I see." The male student finished up the first pack. His handiwork was careful and deliberate. The noodles were perfect, with the ingredients mixed thoroughly and evenly together, and the pile of noodles properly centered. It was clear he'd put everything he had into it.

As for the other pack... the moment Felinella turned her eyes towards Alus, he threw half-boiled noodles into a pack and poured spices over it with anger and resentment. The surrounding male students silently approved of his actions. Seeing as how even the girls did the same, it was clear Felinella was popular with both genders.

It was a truly gruesome act of cooking carried out behind Felinella's back. Alus saw it happen but looked away, pretending he didn't see it.

Eventually, the two packs were done, and Felinella held her license against the register. The male student who'd cooked the yakisoba thanked her for her patronage and bowed. He then pushed the two packs aside for a moment and brazenly asked for a handshake.

Felinella of course couldn't say no, and it was the perfect chance for Alus. Deceiving the eyes of that excited student was a trivial task. He swiftly reached out for the already finished yakisoba packs and grabbed one at lightning-fast speed, replacing it with the overly spiced one made for him.

Once Felinella was finished paying, Alus brushed off the unsuspecting male student's resentful stare, and the two of them left the stall. He felt bad for whoever would end up eating that, but it wasn't his fault to begin with, and if the stall's reputation bombed because of it, that would be the male student's own fault.

This kind of thing was a daily occurrence for Alus. He did have three beautiful first-year girls around him every day, after all. His classmates had begun to acknowledge him lately, but there was no way to avoid the men's jealous stares, especially from those of other class years. He'd more or less been forced to accept it and was on the verge of resigning himself to it, but he wasn't really the type to be bothered by things like that.

Still, thinking about it, Felinella's popularity was frightening. Not to mention the jealous and hateful stares he received now were on par with the ones he got when he was with the three first-year beauties.

Just as Alus entertained that thought—

"Aaaaaaack!!" A scream echoed in the distance. It was truly bloodcurdling. Alus imagined that someone at the stall they just left must've had the misfortune of getting the yakisoba he exchanged before.

"I wonder what that is?" Felinella asked.

Alus bluntly shut her down. "I don't think it's something to worry about."

"N-No? Then, why don't we find somewhere to eat these?" she said, and looked around, but it was hard to see anything with students all around them. "Oh...?!" Apparently, she'd only now realized the situation they were in, and her cheek twitched in a vague expression of joy mixed with annoyance.

"At this time of day, I'm sure there are a lot of people by the auditorium, too."

"I guess it can't be helped. It's a bit improper, but what else can we do. That's right, there's no other way." Felinella looked around as she rambled on about

something. She then pointed out a place.

It was a vast lawn a bit out of the way. And it was then that Alus realized what she meant by “improper” was probably sitting on the ground. Though it was questionable if that’s what she really believed.

To get there, they had to hurry along and shake off the stares of curious onlookers. She even pulled him over to the spot. It need not be said that doing this made her look like the assertive one, another source for rumors. That meant that she’d risked starting rumors just to bring him here.

“Now then, Mr. Alus...” She sneakily began making preparations, as if she was afraid of being seen. She also spoke in a nervous whisper. Perhaps it was the situation that made her do it, but it did make them look like a couple having a secret rendezvous.

Felinella brought out a handkerchief from her pocket and spread it out on the grass. “Here, Mr. Alus.”

For the time being, he decided to forget about asking why she looked so happy. “If I sit down, then there won’t be any room for you, Feli. I don’t mind sitting on the ground, so why don’t you sit down?”

“We can’t have that. I couldn’t accept having only you sitting down on the ground,” Felinella firmly refused with a gentle smile.

I guess she was this kind of girl, Alus thought. But he didn’t really get upset about it. In fact, he felt it was a virtue of hers.

“T-Then, why don’t we both use it?” she suggested, her eyes cast down on the grass.

Alus agreed, realizing that they wouldn’t get anywhere otherwise, and glanced down at the handkerchief. *Isn’t this a little too small for both of us?* he thought, but it would be tasteless of him to mention that now. Deciding he wasn’t going to care what happened, he sat down first.

Felinella then leaned over to take the rest of the space. She neatly tucked away her skirt and slowly sat down, confirming where the handkerchief was while doing so.

This wasn't on the level of bumping shoulders. They were so close that they were practically squeezed up against one another. But the thought that ran across Alus' mind was how difficult it was going to be to eat the yakisoba this way. Instead of touching the pack, he was close enough to hear her beating heart. That said, nothing would come from sitting still.

"Yes, all right then, thank you for the food," Alus said to get the ball rolling and awkwardly opened up the lid of the pack.

"Y-Yes! Please go ahead first," Felinella urged him, with a strange tension in her voice.

They were pressed for time as it was. Alus had no intention of wasting more time than he had to by talking, but that didn't mean he was unsympathetic to the goodwill Felinella had shown. Even when he'd tried to pay for the yakisoba, she had refused, saying it was part of the pay for the security job Illumina had given him.

Incidentally, the yakisoba that he'd switched out had been made a while back, so it was a little cold. But that didn't mean much to him. The problem right now was that Felinella hadn't told him what she was expecting, yet she was staring at him with a serious look on her face.

He guessed that she wanted his impression of the food. Meaning that he didn't have much choice. That said, Alus didn't demand anything other than nutrition from his meals, so he wouldn't be able to give any interesting responses.

Anyways, it was clear that Felinella wasn't going to eat if he didn't. "A-All right then," he said in an exasperated tone, eating some of the noodles.

Felinella watched him intently. Taste aside, it was hard to focus on eating when you were being stared at. He took time to swallow the first bite to figure out what kind of comment to make. But in cases like these, he already knew what to say. After all, whenever Loki or Felinella had questions, the answer they wanted was written on their faces.

"How is it?" Felinella asked, her expectations clear in her expression.

So Alus pulled out the canned response he had in mind. "Yes, I can see why

they have such a good reputation. It's really tasty... Why don't you try eating some too, Feli?" He barely knew what he was saying, simply picking out words that sounded nice.

In that regard, he'd have to thank Loki later. This was pretty much his stock answer whenever she asked him. He didn't really know if it tasted good or not. Having only thought of food as a source of nutrition, maybe his sense of taste had gone awry. At any rate, he called anything delicious if it was edible.

It might sound like he had a refined palate, but when you got down to it, his sense of taste was underdeveloped. It wasn't like he couldn't taste anything at all, but he'd never consciously enjoyed a meal.

"If you say so... I'm glad to hear it! This is my first time trying this type of food, so I was really looking forward to it."

Alus stopped thinking for a moment when he heard that. From the way she said it, it sounded like she was making him taste it first, but there was no point in complaining about it.

This time it was Alus' turn to look on as Felinella scooped up some noodles and brought them to her soft-looking lips. She then bit them into fine pieces. Her manners were truly elegant, making even stall food look like a high-class dish. She gently put down the fork and covered her mouth. "My! It really is delicious!" she said with relief.

Before long, they both finished their yakisoba. Felinella put the open boxes to the side so she could throw them away later. Alus thought he'd finally be able to return to work, but that only lasted for a moment.

"Actually, I bought this too," Felinella said. In her hand was a small paper plate, with some dainty-looking food on it.

Alus was aware that this was a common dessert dish. The main ingredient was fruit, sliced into bite-sized pieces, and eaten with syrup, cream, or chocolate. It was like a dessert version of fondue. On the plate was a single toothpick, likely for use in picking up the fruit.

Seeing this, Felinella, in a very deliberate tone, said, "Oh. There's only one."

Alus gazed quizzically at her awkward words, and at the same time, let out a

sigh in a way she wouldn't notice.

This was where the true battle began. Even if he searched his mind for references to go by, he didn't have any experience with this kind of thing. It wasn't like he hated sweets, but he hadn't gone through this much with Loki either. But there was no escape.

"Here you go." Felinella held out a piece of fruit on the toothpick to Alus.

"If there's only one, I'll refrain. You can have it, Feli."

She maintained a smile, completely brushing off Alus' refusal. The fruit glistened with transparent syrup as it slowly approached Alus' mouth.

Being stubborn here would be unproductive. So he gave in to the pressure and opened his mouth. When it touched his lips, he wordlessly chewed and swallowed it. The syrup added a layer of sweetness to the fruit's sourness. He found it to be unexpectedly delicious.

Felinella, meanwhile, looked ecstatic over how things were going.

"Feli, it's about..." They actually still had some time left, but Alus tried to call it quits in an attempt to get away. Unfortunately, he was interrupted.

"Oh, excuse me. You wanted another one, didn't you?" Without hesitation, Felinella picked up another piece of fruit and dipped it in the cream topping. The fruit on the toothpick was covered in sweet-looking white droplets that looked like they would slip off at any moment. Her smile seemed to be asking that he hurry up and open his mouth already. Her expression wasn't so much seductive as it was innocent.

Alus' intuition told him this was bad. Opening his mouth again for any reason was bad. He had a feeling that she would no doubt bring up piece after piece of fruit, dipping them in various toppings, and throw them into his mouth, not giving him any room to object. But as expected, even now any resistance was futile.

For a time, he gave up on counting the number of defeats he suffered. Suddenly, he found that he'd gotten some chocolate cream on his mouth. Though it wasn't clear if it had been on purpose or not. But there was no mistaking the gleam in Felinella's eye when it happened.

“Y-You’ve got cream... on your mouth,” she mumbled.

Alus stared at her coldly. It was a scenario that anyone would be envious of, but unfortunately that wasn’t the case for Alus, who’d grown up in the military. He had a feeling Felinella was about to make her final move. *Any more than this will be too sugary for me. And how much is she planning on feeding me, anyway?*

Even Alus knew what was likely to happen next in this situation, which was why it was easy for him to follow what had happened so far. To him, the slight increase in the beating of his heart was competing against an impenetrable wall.

He used reason and logic and tried to wipe it away with his hand ahead of time, but his arm was firmly grabbed by a soft hand. Some mysterious power forcibly made him lower the arm again.

Felinella’s smile remained unchanged. “I see you have a surprisingly cute, clumsy side.” She giggled, and naturally continued with her next line. “Oh dear, I guess I’ll have to wipe it off.”

With an image of what would happen next, Alus resigned himself with a “T-Thanks,” and left the rest to fate. He couldn’t even put up a fight. He cursed his lack of experience and admitted defeat.

Felinella put her hand on the ground and leaned closer. Alus could hear her breathing become uneven. Looking at her up close, he saw her fine skin and lovely facial features. There were times when she looked mature, but when she did things like this, it reminded him that she was still a girl, just like Tesfia or Alice.

He could affirm that both sides of her were part of her charm. At the same time, he couldn’t help but wonder how Vizaist had a daughter like this. He would never say it out loud, but she’d probably taken after her mother, as she didn’t look the slightest bit like Vizaist. But he could see signs of her father’s blood in the way she composed cautious strategies and launched bold offensives.



“There, all clean.”

Alus, who had his eyes closed, realized that she’d gone against his expectations. In her hand was a second handkerchief, which she’d used to clean the area around his mouth. If there had been any onlookers, they might have thought things should have gone a little differently.

But Alus didn’t particularly mind, which was only natural, because this was a normal result if you thought about it. Wiping the cream off with her own finger and then eating it herself was perhaps too high of a hurdle for the lady-like Felinella.

Or maybe she was just unaware of what was a common occurrence for couples. Or maybe that action exceeded what she considered tolerable for a noble’s manners... only she knew the truth. Then again, nobody would complain even if she did it.

It was a frustrating result, and Alus just barely managed to keep himself from shouting out that she had another handkerchief after all.

After that, they perused the stalls, using up all of the time Alus was allotted for their pseudo date. This was his first time seeing Felinella behaving so innocently, but it wasn’t just him either. Rumors spread across the campus in the blink of an eye, and there were many who came to take a peek at them and confirm the truth. As a result, there were plenty of stunned students with shocked expressions around.

However, the person at the center of it all, Felinella, treated it like it was no concern of hers. If anything, she seemed to be acting as though she wanted to show off to those miscreants.

But the truth was that she truly enjoyed this time with Alus from the bottom of her heart. Her wish that their time together would last forever was made clear with her every gesture and expression.

Alus had been dragged around everywhere, but if asked if he found it unpleasant, he would say he didn’t. Then again, if asked if he was enjoying himself, he’d say that he didn’t know. Just being around Felinella, who was practically exuding bliss, made even Alus feel comfortable. So if asked if he was

having fun, he might just nod. In this moment, he felt something akin to peace of mind.

The surrounding stares didn't bother Felinella, nor did she make any attempt to hide her joy. With a bright smile on her face, she pulled Alus to new stalls and fun-looking events. And every time, Alus was brought into a special atmosphere that was richly colored by her bliss.

Eventually, they made their way to the training grounds. Suddenly, Alus looked up at the giant clock on the main building. Felinella, who'd been talking to him with a smile, suddenly fell silent.

The hustle and bustle of their surroundings, which had been feeling distant, quickly returned. It was like the vibrant feel of the world was rapidly fading away.

After closing his eyes for a moment, Alus exhaled and spoke out. "It's a shame, but it's about time."

Felinella nodded as if to convince herself, and brightly spoke up with a forced smile, "Yes. I wish we could go on for longer, but I guess this is it. Thank you for going along with my selfishness." She'd known this time would come, but now that it was finally here, she wasn't confident that she'd be able to smile properly. There were still plenty of places they hadn't been to. And she felt like she was waking up from a dream. She'd returned to a childlike mentality, forgetting about everything, just spending time with him. So for now, she should settle for that satisfaction.

When she thought of it in that way, she felt a refreshed feeling in her mind. As her beating heart settled down, Felinella was dragged back to reality, realizing her status and position. *Don't feel so down, the next time will be even more fun. It will be even more wonderful.*

This wasn't the end. It was only the beginning. She was a little proud of herself, devoting herself to a single man. She felt like she'd met a version of herself she wasn't aware of before.

That's why she had to ask. "... Mr. Alus, did you have fun?" She smiled broadly, but she could hear the tremble in her voice.

Now if only this wasn't so self-serving. “Yes, it was the most fun I’ve had in a while,” Alus said with a smile.

He then realized something about himself and smiled wryly. His supposed fortress that Vizaist had talked about didn’t seem so solid anymore. It was more like it was made of papier-mâché.

Silence fell between the two. However, there was no way for anyone to stop the happy time that was drifting away. Then, an unmistakable breeze of early winter blew past, caressing their bodies.

Alus was a year younger than her, but he certainly didn’t sound like it. At least, that’s how it seemed to Felinella. As if ruminating over her joy, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath before saying, “I feel the same way.” This time she’d been able to say so from the bottom of her heart.

Alus answered her with a smile. “Are you going back to headquarters, Feli? I was planning on looking in on those girls at the training grounds first.”

“In that case, I will accompany you. I’ve only received some progress reports on the mock battles, so I want to take a look for myself, too.”

“I see.” By “those girls,” he was of course referring to Tesfia, Alice, and Loki. And so the two turned their attention to the training grounds. It was then that they finally noticed the large crowd of people moving towards the grounds, some even in a big rush who ran past Alus and Felinella.

“It looks to be booming,” Alus noted.

“Yes. The demonstrations should be over by now, so the mock battles must have started. Still...” The mock battles were the most popular event of the campus festival, but Felinella was a little taken aback by how unexpectedly busy it was.

Alus figured that was how it always was, but it did seem a little strange. The crowd had been growing for a while now, and the stream of people heading to the training grounds had picked up more momentum, turning into a raging current. At this rate, the training grounds might go over its audience capacity.

As if proving this, the cheers from inside the grounds were getting louder and louder. The crowd’s passion could practically be felt from here.

“Oh yeah, weren’t you going to take part too, Feli?”

“I have my management committee work to do, so I’ll do mock battles from tomorrow onward. The first day is the busiest, after all.”

“I see.” Thinking about it, Alus remembered Illumina had said something like that too.

“But if the crowd is going to be this big, then not much might change between today and tomorrow.”

“Maybe not. Well, good luck with it. I’ll drop by to take a look while working security.”

“Yes, but you’re free to help out too, you know,” Felinella responded jokingly. She had a friendly smile on her face, still basking in the afterglow of the fun from before.

“I’m sure Illumina would get angry at me if I did. I haven’t even done any proper work today.”

“Oh, how modest.” Considering the smile on her face, Felinella must’ve heard about the exhibit incident. “Well, she is scary when she’s angry... but only for a little bit.” She looked inside the training grounds with a mischievous glance, and Alus agreed with a wry smile.

The abnormal excitement over the mock battles did slightly bother him. Incidentally, anyone was free to join the mock battles, and sometimes active-duty Magicmasters joined in too. Most, of course, let the students shine, but occasionally there were some really strong students, forcing the professionals to get serious, which got the crowd fired up. Perhaps something like that was happening now.

However, going through the general entrance with this crowd would take too long. So in the end, Felinella used her authority as management committee chairperson to use the back door that led to the competitors’ waiting room. A poster said staff only, but they were in the management and security teams, so there shouldn’t be any problem with that.

They passed by the waiting and dressing rooms and headed down the hallway to the audience seats. The two came across some people along the way, but

everyone in the Institute knew Felinella, so all they did was bow.

Eventually, they came out of a dim hallway and squinted as they entered the training grounds. Their eyes had adapted to the dark, so the light streaming in was blinding. The area they'd come out into was a space secured for competitors, so it was relatively free of spectators.

Looking around the training grounds, it was clear that the bleachers were packed. There were even people standing in the aisles.

When Alus looked over at a certain match taking place, he narrowed his eyes. Mock battles were taking place on four fields, and the match that caught his attention was strange, to say the least.

Felinella let out a surprised voice. "Two against one...? That's an odd turn of events."

Her words hadn't been intended for anyone, but someone suddenly called out to her from behind. "I'm sorry, madam chair."

The person behind the voice was a male student who was scratching his head with an apologetic expression. His name was Delca Base, and he was a well-known third-year who was one of the strongest students in the Institute. He was also the supervisor for the mock battles.

"I believe changes to the match format are up to the supervisor to decide to adapt to the situation as needed, so what happened?" Felinella asked, and Alus was curious as to the answer as well. After all, both Tesfia and Alice were taking part in that strange match. Of course, they weren't fighting each other, which would've replicated their match in the tournament. As proof of that, there was indeed a third person present.

This person wore a distinctive red robe that stood out, even from where Alus and Felinella were standing. The hem was long enough to drag across the ground, and the sleeves were similarly long, so there was a lot of fabric left over. It was clearly too large for the person, who looked like a child in adult clothing.

Based on the figure's small stature and the hair peeking out from under the robe, it appeared to be a young girl. Her appearance made her look younger

than Loki. She had platinum blonde hair, but with crimson ends, as if the tips were soaked in fresh blood. And of all things, she appeared to be taking on both Tesfia and Alice at the same time.

At first glance, it might have looked like an innocent child who'd joined in for fun... but the truth didn't seem so simple. She wasn't even using an AWR, yet she was on par with—no, she was even stronger than—both Tesfia and Alice together. In fact, they were completely under her thumb, as if she was training them.

The gap was overwhelming. And excluding Alus and Loki, the two girls were the top of the first-year students. As one could understand from their display at the tournament, it wouldn't be strange for Tesfia's and Alice's combat prowess to be considered in the Triple Digit range. They still lacked experience in the Outer World, but they were being instructed by Alus, so they weren't unfamiliar with fighting against people. And yet, the girl they were fighting wasn't giving them any openings.

Moreover, she had spotted their shortcomings and purposely prodded them, instructing while she fought. And it wasn't just the power of their magic, but flawed footwork and openings in incantations. She was skillfully taking advantage of points they needed to improve on, while maintaining her overwhelming edge and avoiding making any decisive moves.

Of course, Tesfia and Alice were giving it their all. That much was clear from all the magic flying around combined with their martial arts, but... it was a bizarre situation no matter how you looked at it.

With an astounded expression, Felinella's eyes asked for an explanation from Delca, who scratched his head again and started telling them what happened. "That girl in the red robe just suddenly appeared, saying she wanted to fight the strongest one here. Everyone thought it was a joke at first, but it's a festival, and everyone's free to join in after all. So they told her the names of two first-years and asked her to choose, but..."

"She asked for both?" Felinella said with surprise.

Delca nodded. "Normally, you request who you want to fight at the reception desk, but it seems she just passed by there and barged in." Before any

commotion could break out, Delca then stepped in. “She was acting kind of self-important if you ask me, but apparently she’s older than she looks. Of course, I asked for her identification, and it appears that she’s part of Alpha’s military.”

“So that’s why you allowed it.”

“As the supervisor, I had no other choice.” Like Delca said, there was no reason to refuse military personnel from their own nation. A student like himself was practically guaranteed to join the military in the future, so if they brought up their position, he didn’t have a choice.

Not to mention it was the girl who had sought to fight two on one. As far as Alus knew, there was no one like that in the military, although his knowledge was admittedly limited in that regard. Since he preferred to work alone, he didn’t know everyone who was in the military.

As Tesfia and Alice were getting roughed up, Alus observed their opponent’s movements. The first thing he noticed was that her arms never left her sleeves, despite being in the middle of battle. That was likely a strategy to hide her flow of mana, but it meant she was really skilled.

The next moment, Alus felt a familiar presence approach from behind.

“Al...”

“Loki. What is it?” He glanced at her.

She had a somewhat sullen look on her face. “Where did you go?” She had participated in the mock battles as well, but had taken a break a while ago, and so had set out to look for Alus. But when she searched the areas he was assigned to, she found no trace of him, only to find him together with Felinella when she came back. It wasn’t something she could accept so easily.

“I was having lunch with Felinella. But something interesting is going on here.”

Loki glanced at Felinella and snarled like a beast as if to intimidate her, then casually brought herself closer to Alus. It was her usual position, but she was close enough to touch shoulders. Maybe she’d gotten closer to discuss something more delicate. “You mean you came when I was on break?”

“Yeah, I guess so...” Alus was focused on the match and didn’t react to Loki getting so close, and on top of that his answer was vague. “—!!”

Suddenly, the robed girl locked eyes with Alus, while dodging Tesfia’s and Alice’s spells. It wasn’t just his imagination either. She had without a doubt reacted to his gaze and was staring back at him. That wasn’t something you could do in the middle of a fight without a lot of breathing room.

The next moment, her lips moved. “You’re finally here.”

There was no way to hear her voice from that distance, but that was clearly what she said. Alus also didn’t overlook the fearless smile that appeared on her lips.

Meanwhile, before the strange match began...

Tesfia and Alice were fighting mock battles, but they didn’t struggle in any of them, winning match after match. That was because they were only fighting little more than amateurs.

The most common type of opponent was someone who was considering taking the entrance exam for the Second Magical Institute. Against these opponents, they naturally acted like seniors, giving them guidance. Sometimes it was by action, and other times they used words too... but only when the person was so apparently inexperienced that they just naturally said something. At those times, a certain person’s habits and way of speaking would come to mind.

Now that they were in his shoes, they could understand. And they also received an understanding of the difficulty of having an inadequate student. It was more mentally wearing than physically exhausting.

The mock battles were run in shifts, but as expected, the tournament participants were especially popular. It was enough to make them tired of it, but they still treated all opponents with respect because their innocence reminded them of themselves from a few months back. They hadn’t known left from right, and their knowledge of magic was superficial at best. Even their way of fighting had been unreliable.

Even now, Tesfia had plenty of energy to spare, as she sheathed her katana AWR. On the other side of the arena was a young boy with his breath running ragged.

“Thank you very much! I’ll definitely enroll here next year and become your junior!!” the boy declared, to which Tesfia replied with an awkward smile, and the mock battle came to an end. There wasn’t much advice she could give him. But she was pretty elated at having such a straightforward shout-out of respect directed her way.

When she returned to the waiting room, she was greeted by Alice wearing a mischievous smile. “He was pretty cute. Did you like him?”

“W-What are you talking about... he’s just a child.”

“Hmm, really? I was sure he would be enrolling here next year.”

“... Well, he did say that...”

Alice’s face lit up as she gave Tesfia a teasing look. “I knew it! Since you hid it for a second, I guess that means—”

“Y-You’re wrong! I’m not interested in someone that weak.”

“Then what’s your type?”

As expected of best friends, they could casually chat about things like love relationships. However, the ideal man Tesfia talked about always referred to rank or strength. But in reality, neither Alice nor Tesfia had a clear image of what that meant.

Tesfia threw out her already prepared response that she’d used before at her best friend’s question. “I want someone strong, high-ranking, and reliable.”

“Wouldn’t Al work, then?”

“—!!” For some reason, hearing that made Tesfia stop thinking, and she could feel her face get hot. A scene flashed through her mind of an idealized future, where the two formed a normal family and cared for each other after returning home from missions in the Outer World. More than anything, Alus felt a bit out of place as the husband in that scene, but maybe that was just the way a girl her age dreamed about things.

As proof of that, the next scene that played out in her mind was her cooking, despite her lack of skills, with Alus thanking her with a sweet smile. This was something unthinkable in reality... but looking at it, while it was falsely beautified, it was still a fantasy of a normal couple supporting each other.

That aside, Tesfia tried to cool her head by shaking it back and forth. It was strange, considering how much she disliked him before, and Alice had only asked her a casual question, yet it had spurred her imagination into overdrive.

This isn't right at all, this is just a trick of the mind or something like that! Who would enjoy being around that grumpy face all the time? But yeah, I can respect him as the ranked No. 1, he's overwhelmingly strong enough for that. He's also smart... and not bad looking... and he has a solid sense of himself...

As Tesfia laid out his qualities in her mind, her line of thinking reversed at some point. However... *But... t-that's right, my mother wouldn't permit it so easily in the first place! W-Well, he does take care of me during training, and the Governor-General respects him... wait, wasn't he the reason the talk about a fiancé for me was postponed too?* It had all been thanks to Alus that her mother Frose put off engagement talks. It was only now that Tesfia recalled Frose had taken an interest in him. Wasn't it because Alus had appeared that she forgot about the engagement talks? Frose wasn't the kind of person to listen to her daughter so easily, if not for something like that.

Tesfia desperately tried to think of something negative about Alus to help her deny this line of thought, but the only thing she recalled was the poor impression she'd gotten when she first met him. What's more, she didn't really know how to feel right now... even that impression from the past meant little in the present, so she couldn't put her mind at ease.

Thinking about it... there was no reason why Alus couldn't become her fiancé. Though there was no way he would ever take an interest in someone so troublesome.

Tesfia sighed at that and decided to quit thinking about it. At the very least, she hoped she could have a relationship with someone she wanted, rather than someone her mother had chosen. The conditions she'd told Alice were only secondary, a way to escape from the situation. However, Tesfia had never

experienced what it was like to be in love. So even when she thought about Alus in terms of liking or hating, she rather liked him. And it was easy to add the words “as a friend” to that.

Meanwhile, Alice, who’d seen through Tesfia’s feelings with ease, had a carefree smile on her face as her best friend returned to reality. “You might end up having many rivals,” she said in a lighthearted manner.

Of course, Tesfia vehemently objected. “Like I said, it’s not like that! Why are you being so persistent?!”

“That’s because there’s someone who perfectly fits your conditions.”

“Like. I. Said!!”

Seeing her best friend lose it, Alice let out a very fake scream and turned to run away.

That was when Delca Base called out to them, putting a stop to their friendly chat. He was a third-year student who, despite being nobility, wasn’t very boastful about it, and he was the supervisor of these mock battles. Not to mention he was one of the upperclassmen Tesfia had looked up to when she enrolled.

According to Delca, there was no time for rest, as the next challenger was waiting. There were plenty of students that could be requested for these battles, and Tesfia didn’t feel too bad about being so popular, but she was curious about his unsettled expression. “So, uhm...? Which field is my next match on?”

“Uh, well, that’s...” Delca was being very evasive. But once Tesfia and Alice heard what he had to say, they furrowed their brows.

And so they headed for the grounds where their strange challenger awaited. When they arrived, they found a small girl wearing a red robe too big for her.

Delca had said she was with Alpha’s military, but they found it hard to believe. Loki already looked pretty young, but the girl before them looked even younger. But Delca had already set up the special match, so they had no choice in the matter anyways.

Tesfia walked onto the training grounds and whispered to Alice, “What are we going to do?”

“I guess we have no choice but to fight. Don’t forget to hold back, Fia,” Alice said, warning Tesfia.

But that was only natural. Tesfia was born with a lot of mana, and her level of control fluctuated depending on her emotions. Though when it came to control, Alice wasn’t really in a position to complain about others.

The two-on-one format might be unusual for students, but it was often used in the military to train combinations and teamwork. Even if their opponent was a soldier, the two were confident that they were much stronger than they had been when they enrolled, thanks to Alus’ training. Fiends were one thing, but a normal Magicmaster would likely struggle to deal with two human fighters.

Alice had fought an active-duty Magicmaster who’d joined in for fun that morning, and their match ended in a tie. As for the match itself, Alice had nearly overwhelmed her opponent in magical aptitude, but maybe that was only the way it appeared. Being the campus festival, it was possible that the Magicmaster had gone easy on her.

At any rate, matches were usually one-on-one, so this kind of irregularity tended to attract attention. Even more so when the two students involved had won first and second place at the Friendship Magical Tournament’s first-year division.

In fact, there were regulars in the audience who showed up for the mock battles each year hoping to see what unexpected twists and turns the new students would bring. That’s why “What’ll happen this year?” and similar statements could be heard throughout the audience.

For better or worse, the results of many prospective students’ matches were foregone conclusions. At best, the audience would cheer them on to give their future seniors a run for their money. On the other hand, when military personnel or alumni joined in, the audience would cheer for the student and enjoy a thrilling match.

Some distance away, Delca watched the two step onto the training grounds with a worried expression. He had a manly composure about him, but seeing

that the match was already full of anomalies, he suspected that it was going to give him a headache, which was why he felt the need to pay extra attention to this one. After all, he didn't want anything to happen to the opponent. Nor did he want his own institute's students to get in trouble, since they were his responsibility as the supervisor.

Meanwhile, Tesfia and Alice didn't forget to pay due respect to their senior, the red-robed girl. Yet even now they found it hard to believe she was military personnel. They still found it easier to believe that she'd shown a fake license. But if that was the case, it would far exceed the realm of a child's playful trick. Not to mention the techniques needed to accomplish it, which certainly seemed beyond what the girl before them should be capable of doing.

"I'm sorry for being late," Tesfia said, and she and Alice lightly bowed.

The girl didn't particularly seem to mind, as she answered them with a smile on her face. "That's fine. I'm the one who asked for the impossible... but maybe they didn't understand me when I asked for the strongest student?" She put a finger against her small well-shaped lips with a questioning expression.

Tesfia and Alice were surprised by her reaction for a moment but recovered. "I'm sorry," Tesfia said. "There are certainly competitors who are above us, but they're not available right now. So could you not settle for us?"

As far as Alice could tell, Tesfia had the proper aristocratic manners to handle these kinds of situations. Moreover, she was rather confident, as while she'd said there were some above her, she didn't say that they were stronger.

Alice wasn't going to back down either, though she spoke in a mild manner. "We might be inexperienced, but we'll face you with all our might."

The red-robed girl let a grin show. But perhaps because of her childlike appearance, it didn't look particularly malicious. "I don't mind. It'll be a good opportunity to judge Alpha's current level. Do try your best to help me kill time, young ones," she said as if to provoke them.

But neither got angry, as they brushed off her remark. It did, however, feel odd for someone who looked younger than them to take on such an air of superiority. But it was more weird than angering or discomforting. The atmosphere around her felt more like a child forcing herself to act like a villain,

which was more adorable than anything.

That said—a match was a match. The next moment, Tesfia drew her katana and Alice readied her golden spear.

When the robed girl saw those AWRs, she gave a snort of admiration. Yet she showed no sign of entering a battle stance. She was clearly convinced that she was above the two, showing quite a bit of composure.

But there was something else on the two girls' minds. The match was about to begin, so there was something the girl would need—the symbol of a Magicmaster, the essence of magic technology: an AWR.

Yet the girl didn't seem to have one. It was possible she was hiding it within her large robe, but it certainly didn't look like it to them.

“Uhm, where is your AWR...?” Alice asked.

There was a pause. The red-robed girl had a vacant look for an instant. This wasn't an act. She really didn't seem to understand what Alice was saying. After thinking about it, the girl finally realized the meaning of the question and thought to herself: *They must believe that you can't fight without an AWR. Talk about a stupid bunch... but I guess I should follow tradition.* The girl let out an exasperated sigh. There was even a bit of pity in her sigh.

At some point, magic technology had seen a lot of advancement while she was unaware of it; but at the same time, those looking to become Magicmasters had apparently lost their sense of creativity and flexibility.

As if to answer the two, she focused mana into her arms. With her childish body, she guessed the two brats before her were trying to be considerate of her. She'd held it in but figured it was about time. She couldn't do anything but resign herself when even people almost a century younger than her were underestimating her.

And so, she pulled her sleeve back a little, while directing the darkness within her towards her opponents. The mana in her arm condensed over her slightly exposed hand, instantly forming a sword made of water. After a beat, the sword dissolved into water and was sucked into her sleeve.

But the next moment... a pure blade made solely from water extended out

from her sleeve in combat-ready form. “Will this do?”



“—!!” “—!!”

A chill ran down Tesfia's and Alice's spines when they witnessed the blade being made from clear water. That was because normally it would be extremely difficult to create and maintain such a beautiful form. It was something made possible only through outstanding skills. The two had had firsthand experience of that, so they knew how skilled the girl was, whether they liked it or not.

In that instant, their unconscious understanding of who was strong here and who was weak got turned on its head.

Alice hurriedly apologized. “I-I'm sorry for saying something so presumptuous!”

“I don't mind. It's just that I'm not very good with AWRs. Maybe it's my old age, but I can't keep up with these new things...” The way she rubbed her temple while wearing a bitter smile certainly did look strangely old and true to nature.

Tesfia and Alice exchanged looks and responded with forced smiles. But thinking of it another way, it was a chance for them. If she really was military from Alpha, it meant they could learn under someone other than Alus for a change. After all, just a single glance at the water sword made it clear she was far above the two of them. It was unclear how advanced she was, but maybe they'd be able to fight her to a draw with the two of them.

Tesfia wasn't the only one who'd built up some frustration in her mock battles so far. Even Alice unintentionally poured more mana into her gold spear.

“May I ask for your name? I'm Tesfia Fable. And this is...”

“Alice Tilake.”

The girl smiled wryly at the direct question. Instead of her usual name, because she was using a fake I.D. here, she decided to use that name instead. “... It's Minalis. But I'll allow you to refer to me as ‘young lady’ when not using my name.”

She felt a sense of discomfort every time that name was mentioned. The true owner of that name had been eliminated a long time ago. All traces of their

existence were gone. It had been the name of a weak woman who'd foolishly wielded false justice without being able to see through it as such and who had been ruined for it. The name of Minalis reminded the girl of that detestable past.

"Well then, are you ready? It's only to kill time until my first choice gets here, but I don't like wasting time, so come at me with all you've got," the girl—Minalis—casually said. At the same time, she opened and closed the fingers of the hand she was pouring mana through.

The hand was hidden under her sleeve, so it was unclear whether they actually noticed it, but both Tesfia and Alice got serious, releasing their own mana. It was an odd mock battle, but the two worked well together in training, so they might have an easier time fighting this way than they would alone. Because they knew everything about each other, their strength was multiplied.

The buzzer signaling the start of the match rang out.

But seconds passed, and neither Tesfia nor Alice moved. They'd been enthusiastic about going all out to fight a strong opponent, but their legs were stuck to the ground, and cold sweat dripped down their foreheads.

In response, the overwhelmingly powerful Minalis released her own mana. One might expect a twisted, stagnant mana considering how vicious the atmosphere around her was, but it betrayed expectations by being clear and vibrant. And thanks to that, the two were able to sense the obvious difference in ability.

This was the first time they'd felt that since watching Alus fight up close. Even in training they hadn't experienced this kind of torrent of mana. And the two girls gulped at the sight of it.

"Talk about a disappointment! If you're going to lose your nerve over something like this... sometimes being reckless is a virtue." Her way with words was rough, but it rode on a wave of mana and pounded the two girls' eardrums.

Perhaps that was enough to inspire Tesfia and Alice to entrust themselves to a recklessness made possible by the fact that this was a mock battle. It was also a perfect opportunity for Tesfia to show everyone that her growth as a Magicmaster wasn't just about magic and techniques.

After calming her pulsating heart with a deep breath, Tesfia swiftly swung her katana. Immediately the air around her froze with a crunching sound, as thin ice crystals were created.

Alice spun her spear around to encourage herself with its sound and speed. To avoid being overwhelmed by her opponent, she only needed to bring out all of her power to face her.

And so, the two resolved to use full force.

Alus could see the fierceness of Tesfia's and Alice's fight.

And so could the audience, to the point that they were staring with their mouths wide open. Everyone watching thought the same thing, that they'd become even stronger since the Friendship Magical Tournament and that their teamwork brought out all of that strength.

Yet the girl who called herself Minalis was always one step ahead. Her water blade was strong enough to compete with their AWRs, and they couldn't even cut through it with their haphazard attacks because of the torrent of water continuously spinning like a vortex. The moment the AWRs touched it, they were knocked back by the force of it.

Moreover, the water that Minalis manipulated was practically perfect when it came to defense. Tesfia fired off an Ice Bullet at point-blank range when Minalis showed a minor opening. But despite it being in her blind spot, a wall of water rose up and seemingly absorbed the spell. The difference in mana easily overcame the contrast between liquid and solid, nullifying the Ice Bullet.

The next moment, a rapidly spinning thorn of water appeared from out of the wall and launched at Tesfia. Even if it was originally made from liquid, it had been solidified by mana and would easily tear through any ordinary objects.

Tesfia immediately stabbed her katana into the ground, creating an Ice Wall to block the counterattack. The wall of ice that appeared was thicker and more flexible than what she'd shown in the tournament.

But the Ice Wall built to contain the torrent of water was meaningless in the end. When it clashed with the wall, the water split into two, as if it had a mind

of its own. It then circumvented the wall entirely and attacked Tesfia from both her flanks.

—*!! I'll be down for the count if that hits me.* It wasn't just strong. If not for the training grounds changing damage into mental exhaustion, she would have large holes in her body.

Tesfia swiftly pulled her katana out and kicked off the ground. Having just barely dodged the attack, she clung to the top of the wall of ice. The force of the impact of the two torrents of water clashing into each other instinctively made her raise her legs higher. She held her katana in her mouth and grabbed onto the edge with both hands, pulling herself up on top of it.

At the same time, Alice, who'd been waiting for her chance behind Tesfia, swept past the attack and pressured Minalis. They both knew what the other would do, and so they switched over to a pincer attack.

Having regained her posture, Tesfia kicked off of the Ice Wall and swung down her katana.

Minalis had gazed at her coldly since Tesfia seemed to be attacking the air, but soon her lips curled up into a smile. The moisture in the air was frozen into a massive sword of ice and traced the path of Tesfia's attack.

Hm, she's pretty used to fighting. The giant blade definitely had the range to reach her. From what she could tell it had tremendous power. She had a feeling she'd seen that technique somewhere before but put away such pointless thoughts for the moment.

She began racking her brain as to how to handle the attack. Dodging it would be easy, but then she would need to deal with Alice's attack coming from the side. And answering the girls' pincer attack just by dodging was a little dull.

The water blade in Minalis' hand instantly dispersed and scattered into mana particles. And a hand wrapped in bandages peeked out from the sleeve of her robe.

Seeing that, Tesfia and Alice felt exalted. Even if their lives weren't at stake, the joy of fighting with all their might brought up a lot of excitement, which was why they'd flexibly come up with a strategy at the last moment, fully entrusting

themselves to the magic.

Tesfia released even more mana, creating cold air at a breakneck speed, as the sword of ice approaching Minalis changed its shape. The surface of the ice sword cracked, and from within a new sword emerged as if reborn. Its form was truly beautiful, as if it had come from a myth or fairy tale. Having become even sharper, it accelerated quickly as it froze the air around it.

“*«Zepel»*”

As Tesfia swung down her secret weapon, Alice kept her posture low and sprinted. She had her eyes locked on Minalis, determined to strike at her opening even if she dodged Tesfia’s attack.

The distance between Tesfia’s Zepel and Minalis was reduced in moments, and when it looked like her body would be torn apart, Alice pulled her golden spear back with perfect timing. Pulling it all the way back, she focused her mana on the tip of the spear.

This was a new spell that Alus prepared at Alice’s suggestion. She’d gotten the idea for it during the tournament. Believing it would give her a wider variety of tactics if she could use it, Alice had added it to her training menu. After consulting with Alus right after his return to the Institute, she was able to successfully incorporate the movements into the spell she was working on.

It was a spell she’d already been practicing, so it didn’t take long for it to take shape. This was a battle she was already prepared to fail, so she would simply do the best she could.

Her spell was clearly timed so it would come after Tesfia’s Zepel. It was timed to catch her opponent off guard.

Alice quickly thrust her golden spear that was brilliantly shining.
“*«Sirislate»!*”

A flash of light was sent out from the tip. It was an extension of her thrust, clad in light, and the size of a fist. But it moved at the speed of light. And she knew it would reach the opponent faster than Tesfia’s Zepel, which was why she’d adjusted her timing when casting it.

The plan was to make the opponent think she was aiming for the second after

she dodged Zepel, but the speed of the spell would betray her expectations. It was a gamble based on a fraction of a second, but that was why it went just as expected and headed straight for Minalis. If she tried to dodge Zepel, she wouldn't be able to handle the speed of Sirislate.

The moment the two pulled off that combination attack, they became convinced of their victory. Subconsciously, the tension in their bodies relaxed all at once.

However—

Their conviction was completely overturned as Minalis' fearless voice rang out. “*«Tartarus»!*”

In an instant, black liquid seeped out from the ground. It covered her body, and four tails rose up, growing out of her back and waist. At the same time, the excess liquid dispersed and vanished, leaving only the tails behind.

“—!!” Two of the elastic-like tails were swung like whips at frightening speeds, and Tesfia reacted as one of them smashed Zepel to pieces. Her spell seemed to offer no resistance whatsoever, as the ice fragments flew through the air before dispersing into particles.

The other tail headed for Alice. It shivered, as if pulsating, and passed by Alice's side.

The next moment, Alice let out a groan. It hadn't touched her, but the shockwave of it passing by was enough to damage her. Since each tail was thicker than a person's torso, just by moving fast it created a massive shockwave.

After passing Alice by, next the tail contracted to protect Minalis. Then it caught up to Sirislate and wrapped around it, constricting the spell, and easily crushing it. The resulting white smoke rose up from gaps in the tail.

The two tails then slowly returned to normal. There were four long tails made from the black liquid. Even now they wriggled around Minalis' body as if they had lives of their own. Once they gathered, they entirely covered Minalis and her surroundings.

Sirislate was meant to be difficult to dodge, yet a tail that showed up after the

fact had caught up to it. Alice winced in pain from the shockwave, and she was left speechless from what she'd seen. Tesfia was the same.

They'd been shown an overwhelming difference in ability. Just a while ago, they were sure they were fighting on an equal level, but the damage they'd taken from this display of force wasn't only disappointing; it was a big blow to their confidence too. As proof of that, they were in a stunned state, despite being in the middle of a match.

Minalis, meanwhile, furrowed her brows and showed a bitter expression. Even she felt something akin to surprise. It was a strange sensation surging up from her heart, and even if she wanted to deny it—it was the truth.

Her heart was pounding, inspired by the passion of youth.

She'd never expected to be spurred on to such a degree from being challenged in this straightforward fashion. Decades had passed since she'd turned criminal, but how long had it been since she'd felt like this? Which was why she used a portion of her full strength to destroy her opponents.

More than half a century had passed since she first learned how to ruin an enemy's morale and how to dodge using the minimum amount of effort. By now it took more time to select the optimal solution from her wide variety of choices, than it took to actually execute it.

But these two girls had enough potential to force a decision on Minalis. Even she knew that she was being childish using that spell against mere students. She fought against the odd sense of joy she felt upon seeing the budding talent in this young generation that would make up Alpha's future. While she didn't regret her choices, she couldn't help but imagine how she would have stood on the forefront of training Alpha's next generation, if things had been different.

That said, it was only a passing thought. No matter how much this situation dug up old wounds, her past was already so soiled in the darkest colors imaginable that she couldn't feel sentimental about anything. Her past was that defiled.

So I can still harbor the same feelings as a normal person... such lingering attachments are probably fitting for a defiled one like myself.

She sneered at herself. This was what happened when she tried to get involved with the mundane world.

Minalis—now known as Elise of Kurama—believed that the long-range exchange of spells outside Balmes' border had involved Alpha's ranked No. 1. And that he had eliminated the Devourer that she'd been so wary of.

If Alpha's current No. 1 was that powerful, how much would Kurama end up having to pay? How good was he really?

Dakia had hinted at it and told her that if she caused a commotion here, the answers to her questions would come naturally. Those words had seemed reckless, but at the same time they were meaningful. It wasn't like she was being deceived. And she'd knowingly gone along with it.

Then there was the position Elise was in. She had joined the criminal organization because she had no other choice and wasn't particularly attached to it. But as an executive, there was no turning back now.

What she told Dakia wasn't a total lie. If this farce really lured him out, then as an executive of Kurama, she would measure his abilities and remove him if she deemed it necessary.

It was too late to be hypocritical. The only path for her was the one that led to her falling as far as possible. With a sword of hatred, she'd taken revenge, and the only thing she had left was the title of a heinous magical criminal. Of course, it was Elise who had chosen that.

This farce has gone on long enough... Enough reminiscing. She had for a moment immersed herself in the feel of a faintly sweet everyday life that could have been. It was warm, but there was a part of her that completely rejected it. Indeed, she rejected the warm feelings because she was incompatible with the world of the living. She was more or less a walking corpse, after all.

Minalis glanced to the side and looked at him. That extraordinary gaze had been observing the match for a few moments. And her intuition told her that it was the same magical presence that she'd felt in the Outer World.

"You're finally here." With a grin, she turned her focus back to the match at hand. For something she'd only done to kill time, it had been rather enjoyable.

But enough of that. Tesfia and Alice were still looking stunned when Minalis spoke up. “You should have been a little more aware of your surroundings.”

“Huh—?” “...” The two girls looked around upon hearing this. But they didn’t understand what she meant.

In reality, Elise had been spreading her mana around her, little by little, since the start of the match. The information deteriorated, but it seemed she’d even taken that into consideration. Ultimately, she’d created a massive pseudo-magic circle that assisted in the construction of water spells. She’d spread her mana particles in tiny bubbles made from a certain potion to prevent degradation of the information as much as possible.

Mana particles smaller than what usually leaked out of the body now filled the grounds. They were hard to perceive and helped prevent deterioration for a time. It was due to preparations like this that she was able to use Tartarus in an instant, but its original use lay elsewhere.

Tesfia and Alice didn’t sense even a trace of mana until it had already manifested into a spell.

“—!!” “—!!” It was a bonding of mana particles. Countless small bubbles expanded explosively and scattered, filling the air, and inside them was a clear liquid.

The bubbles slowly spread out in front of the two girls and their surroundings.

“Don’t hate me for this,” Elise’s voice rang out clearly.

Bubbles that had floated behind Tesfia and Alice rapidly expanded upon touching them and wrapped around their bodies. In an instant, they were dragged inside bubbles large enough to fit a person and struggled to breathe. Because their entire bodies were wrapped up, they couldn’t even move.

The bubbles were magically suspended in the air, and the water inside killed any momentum, making it impossible to move the bubble itself. It was like they were trapped inside water balloons with no way out.

Upon realizing this, the two girls tried to use their AWRs to cut the bubbles open from inside. However, since the bubbles were formed out of water, they didn’t have membranes. Because of that, stabbing or slashing at it wasn’t going

to do anything. Trapped in the bubbles, more and more air escaped from their lungs.

There were ways to kill people even on the training grounds. Even if the water was made from magic, it didn't stop the damage taken from the water stopping one's breathing.

Tesfia poured mana through her AWR and tried to construct a spell, but with her brain not functioning properly, she wasn't able to follow the process steps. There was no way that her thinking could work normally when she couldn't breathe.

Alice was in the same situation, unable to do anything. As a form of resistance, she stabbed through the bubble with her spear, but the hole just filled back up again. If only someone would grab hold of the spear from the outside and pull her out...

She kept her mouth firmly shut to use up as little oxygen as possible, wishing for help she wasn't sure would come.

Finally, the two could see large air bubbles rising up, as their vision blurred.

The audience didn't seem to realize the severity of the situation, as they could be heard cheering. But after two minutes, someone finally had misgivings. "Hey... isn't this bad?"

That unease began to spread through the audience. "Aren't they unconscious?! Someone help, please!" Even if they didn't understand what the spell was doing, they knew they were seeing something abnormal and began to panic. But no one from the audience could answer the cries.

Shouting for the other competitors didn't help either, as they were all at a loss for words, their eyes fixed on the match. The spell they'd never seen before, along with the overwhelming pressure coming from Elise, left them unable to move even as they understood how bizarre the situation was.

Looking for help, the competitors and staff glanced at Delca Base. He'd been standing in a daze at first, but as he felt all eyes gather on him, he drew his AWR and ran to the match area. "Please undo your spell right now. Their lives are in...!!"

Delca made it clear that the dangerous spell was against the rules, but he was interrupted in the middle of his warning. Or rather, his mouth continued to move, but his following words didn't come out.

The red-robed girl showed no signs of caring, not even pretending to listen to him.

When Delca realized she was doing it intentionally, he found his legs locking up as her pressure grew even stronger.

Though the pressure she was exerting increased, the girl had a bored look as she stared at the two powerlessly floating in the bubbles. It was like a child dropping bugs in a puddle waiting for them to drown.

That's when Delca overheard her speak in a tiny voice that clearly wasn't directed towards him.

"Now what are you going to do, No. 1?" She said words he couldn't understand, raising her chin and turning her head. She wasn't looking at Delca but beyond him.

He finally mustered the willpower to move, but just as he did, he heard the sound of something breaking. At the same time, the barrier of the training grounds shook.

Elise had asked her target, Alus Reigin, the current ranked No. 1, who had finally appeared: *Can you save them?* Dakia told her that the No. 1 was still a boy and trying to hide his power for some reason. She was convinced those words were the truth.

Soon, the answer was brilliantly presented to Elise as she glared at Alus. "—!!"

A short sword was swung at high speed, pulling a chain behind it. Something seemed to be clinging to the edge of the blade, and in the next moment it flew through the air. The black blade easily pierced the training grounds barrier before rapidly changing direction in front of Elise's eyes. It then headed straight for the bubble trapping Tesfia.

By the time it reached her, the sword was moving fast enough to pierce through both the bubble and her, but it moved like it had a will of its own with perfect control, maneuvering through the air to skillfully cut the bubble apart.

Elise's sharp eyes saw that he'd done more than just cut it. Ultimately, the bubble was unable to maintain its form and returned to being just a liquid.

The bubble Alice was trapped in was dealt with the same way, before the short sword rapidly returned to its owner.

Impressed, Elise raised her eyebrows.

Forty-Seventh Chapter

The Young Girl in the World of Dreams

Tesfia and Alice dropped to the ground and onto their knees, coughing repeatedly.

The two students were covered in wounds and had been on the verge of death, but Elise simply stared at them. The only thing on her mind was how her Walpinos had been broken.

So space itself was cut, huh. The very structure of her spell, including its fixed coordinates, must have been torn apart. Since the bubbles were made from magic, they shouldn't have been able to be cut through by physical means, so he had done the impossible. And Elise had definitely seen the torn air absorb some water.

That was unknown magic that she had no memories of. If it was able to cut through space or dimensions itself, then no magic would be able to protect against it. The fact that he'd gone out of his way to show it to her was probably meant as a warning.

In an instant, dense mana flowed out of Elise's body at an explosive rate. In Kurama, nobody picked a straight-up fight against her. Even Hazan only gave her lip and never seriously tried to fight her.

You brat... Very well. Let's see what power you have, No. 1, Alus Reigin. Elise raised an arm towards Alus, bending the fingers of her hand hidden in her sleeve.

Alus glared her way, realizing he would have to take her up on her provocation. After all, that was why she'd used a spell that put Tesfia's and Alice's lives in danger. He didn't know what she would've done if he hadn't shown up.

In the worst case, the audience and even the campus festival visitors might

end up as casualties. That said, if the visitors found out about it, there would be mass panic on the Institute's grounds and everything would be out of control.

Moreover, Alus himself didn't want to make a big deal about it for personal reasons. His inner sense of judgment and feelings meant more than some haphazard cause or idea of justice. That was part of what made him so unusual.

With a stern expression, he gave Felinella some instructions. "Feli, report this to the principal, and then gather the personnel to pursue her."

"O-Okay!!"

"And take care of treating Fia and Alice. Turn off the damage exchange system for the training grounds, and max out the strength of the barrier to keep the audience from harm."

Felinella listened carefully, nodding at his rapid orders. Having seen the match just now, she understood that the girl was in a completely different league than Tesfia and Alice.

It was similar to the overwhelming disparity that was the reason for Felinella's respect for Alus, so she acknowledged his precautions. He'd said in so many words that the girl in the red robe was that strong. Not to mention that he said pursue, not capture. It seemed he had no intention of restraining her here.

Or maybe... he was saying that he couldn't. After a single glance at Alus' serious face, Felinella prepared to move out. She didn't need to ask anything else.

Right now, Alus wasn't an Institute student, but Alpha's ranked No. 1. He had a hunch of who the girl was and decided there was a need to pursue her even if she escaped.

Felinella called out to Delca. Faced with her intense gaze, he vaguely understood her intentions, even if he didn't fully understand the situation.

Alus started heading for the match area. "It is the campus festival, after all. I'll try not to stir things up too much."

He removed his security armband as he said this, causing Felinella to smile for a moment before putting on a serious expression again. Even now, Alus was

being mindful of appearances. He might have the confidence to get things done on his own, but he also took her efforts in the background into consideration as well.

Which meant that she would also do her utmost. She would do what she could as the management committee chair to ensure that Alus could focus on fighting. And so, she replied in a reverent tone of voice as if to convey her feelings, “Yes!!”

A short distance away, Loki stood at attention.

“Loki, keep watch on the outside, there’s no guarantee she doesn’t have allies with her, and we still don’t know what she’s after.”

“If I confirm any enemies intervening...”

“Then you immediately eliminate them. Once the military Magicmasters arrive, you join the pursuit team.”

“Understood,” Loki said with a blank expression and lowered her head. She wished him good luck in her mind but knew he would understand without her saying it for everyone to hear.

If Alus was right, then the campus festival was the least of their concerns, but at the moment there were no reports from other security teams. Seeing as how the red-robed girl had seemingly joined in spontaneously it was likely that this farce was done at her own accord, but there was nothing to lose in staying on guard against others.

The barrier around the training ground match areas disappeared, and all ongoing matches, as well as those waiting to start after them, were canceled. Felinella made the announcement to the venue, as Alus’ lips curled up into a smile at her swift work.

“To everyone in the arena, the two competitors who were injured before are fine, so please don’t worry. I also have another announcement. The mock battle between the student considered to be the strongest in the Second Magical Institute, Alus Reigin, and a challenger from Alpha’s military is about to begin. The challenger’s name will be withheld due to certain circumstances, and their power is unknown, so the entire training grounds will be opened up for their

match.”

Alus’ cheek twitched at the introduction, but it was something he wouldn’t be able to keep hidden in this match—his capability. Felinella had taken that possibility into account when she introduced him.

For the students of the Institute, this was the first they’d heard of it. So they probably interpreted the announcement as Felinella’s acknowledgment of him.

Alus passed by the two girls being carried out on stretchers, and quietly said to them, “Good match.” It was surely a huge learning experience for both of them. Though the last spell had been cast just to force him onto the stage... having to go along with it, despite realizing what the robed girl was doing, grated on his nerves.

Students and challengers alike all cleared out from the training grounds, so someone who was walking against the crowd would stand out. Delca found it strange, so he ran up to Felinella to ask what was going on. It wouldn’t be unusual for him to talk down to her as her senior, but taking her rank and his status as nobility into consideration, he managed to restrain any hasty feelings as he spoke. It was still an abnormal situation, and being the supervisor, he was on pins and needles.

However, Felinella’s answer was calm. “Let’s leave this to Mr. Alus, and try to keep the festival going. So, please work with me.”

This was the first time Felinella had bowed so politely to Delca, who wasn’t fully convinced, but he stopped to think for a moment. He hadn’t participated in the tournament. As an excellent third-year student, he was already destined to join the military, and his rookie training with a squad had already begun. He could, of course, have received permission to participate if he’d requested it, but as someone looking to officially serve in the military, he knew what he should prioritize.

That’s why he knew that Alus had taken part in the tournament, but he hadn’t witnessed his strength for himself. So he had no choice but to make an assumption based on the information he had at hand. But he wasn’t sure he could leave an opponent who’d put two students on the verge of death to someone like that. Being a model student, as well as an upperclassman and a

noble, Delca felt he had a duty and made his decision. “No, I think I’ll handle this.”

He reached for his sword AWR, but Felinella stopped him. “You won’t be enough. Besides, this is an order. Not from me... but from him.”

Delca followed Felinella’s gaze. When he spotted Alus, he drew in his breath in realization. Having already spent a little time in the military, he found it hard to believe, but there was nobody in the military who didn’t know Lord Vizaist’s daughter. There could be no doubting it if she declared it, but the unease was still there.

Words alone wouldn’t be enough. Sensing this, Felinella continued, “We will have to support him so that he can fight without concern. Not to mention that you’ll find out soon enough.”

Seeing how excited she looked, Delca furrowed his brows and sighed at how improper it was. If she was going to say that much, he had to believe her, but with his sense of responsibility he was ready to step in himself if something happened.

“I have a message for the principal, so I have to hurry now.”

“I think I will do that instead. You’re better off staying here than me.”

This was something Alus had directly entrusted to Felinella. It wasn’t something she could leave to someone else. But Delca’s expression said he wouldn’t budge. He must have wanted to verify the truth. He’d especially want proof now that he’d gotten a sense of Alus’ identity.

And so, Felinella felt that she had no choice but to give in. If not, then Delca might intervene in the fight after she left to deliver the message. It was definitely a possibility if he didn’t know who Alus was. Considering his strong sense of responsibility, she wouldn’t be able to blame him if he did.

She absolutely wanted to avoid getting in Alus’ way. He’d even asked her to prepare the stage. So it was only natural that she would prioritize the best choice, given her promise and the current situation. “I understand. The principal should be in the auditorium or her office. The message is, ‘Please prepare a team to pursue that girl.’ I believe Mr. Alus is planning on capturing her outside

of the Institute.”

“What?!” Delca started to wonder just who this girl was that he’d allowed to participate if she required that much consideration. Clearly, her military position had been faked, and she was no ordinary person.

The message to the principal also bothered him. Even though it had the appearance of a request, it went beyond a proposal and was closer to an order.

Finally, Delca was convinced. Alus was part of the military and apparently had a rank close to the principal’s. His astonishment lasted for only a moment as, realizing the importance of the situation, he took off running.

That commotion aside, most of the audience had calmed down a little. Thanks to Felinella’s announcement, they interpreted what happened before as an accident, as the competitors just getting too heated with each other.

The announcement of a new match eased their confusion and helped spark their enthusiasm again. Of course, nobody in the audience knew of Alus’ true power, only recognizing him as the strongest student mentioned in the introduction. So naturally they could expect a higher-level battle than before.

A new barrier was raised that covered the entire training grounds, which was enough to fire up the audience, and they eagerly awaited the beginning of the match as Alus stepped up. The crowd shouted loudly, stomping their feet on the ground in a beat.

As he got close enough, Alus made a lighthearted remark. “Talk about being indirect. Even if you’re in your rebellious phase, you’re going too far...”

Nobody expected that she’d show up here. Looking things over, he could once again affirm... this girl was dangerous. At the same time, it also meant that the audience, as well as tens of thousands of campus festival visitors, were all potential hostages.

“Hehe, you don’t have to look so threatening, kid. I was only playing around with the brats. It’s just hard to hold back, you know?”

“You call me a kid, looking like that?”

Elise’s expression turned to displeasure at Alus’ provocation. She hated it

when people pointed out her appearance to her. The same applied to her age. She wasn't as short-tempered as Hazan, but when she couldn't suppress her anger, she showed no mercy.

She pushed those feelings back for now and instead referred to her spell being broken. "It seems you use some interesting spells... you cut through space itself, didn't you?"

"Hmph. I see you have a good eye," Alus said. He added, "That goes for both of us."

The last spell she'd used, Walpinos, was a rather old spell that was created when humanity was first making breakthroughs in magic. When the concept of magic development was in its early stages, many spells were developed that easily killed humans and similar creatures en masse, as they lacked information on what Fiends really were.

Because of that, much of the magic created back then focused on being fatal. Walpinos, in particular, was created to drown people. The original intent was to fire the water outward, but it ended up being turned into a spell that trapped its target instead.

It had undergone a unique process in its development. It was fatal for humans, but wasn't very effective against Fiends, so almost nobody used it nowadays. It was also one of the spells banned at the Friendship Magical Tournament.

However, Alus had no idea what the spell with the four black tails was, the one that destroyed Tesfia's and Alice's spells. He imagined it was either a special ability or a completely original spell. But in that one instant, he was able to discern that it wasn't a summoning spell. The fact that they were shaped as tails attached to her made him suspect they were connected to her nervous system in some way.

In addition to being able to freely move them, she was probably able to successively rewrite the spell's structure to change their shape and allow for more complicated movements. Or maybe it was an even simpler principle. At any rate, they shouldn't be able to move independently of her body.

"I'm sure there's a lot going on in your mind, but nothing beats practice. I will

personally instruct you. You're stronger than those students from before, aren't you?" Elise said, as if to tease Alus.

Those words were, of course, disingenuous. She was convinced that he didn't know her identity. But it didn't take long for the mask to come off.

"Oh? I see it's true that you get senile with age."

"—!!" Elise's eyes narrowed in a chilling glare.

But before she could open her mouth, Alus followed up with even more provocative words. "Minalis Folce Quartz."

"How... how the hell do you know that name?!" Elise ground her teeth.

"Hm, thought as much." Alus had said the name without much conviction. There'd been a time when he'd researched Kurama once for a mission. Although not everybody's identities were known, there weren't many who could rival Singles either in the underworld or in the public eye. And the older generation of Magicmasters mostly died in the Outer World.

Alus made his painstaking way through the investigation, but when it came to confidential documents on Alpha, he could more or less peruse them through Berwick. But even given his knowledge and that information, he couldn't get a perfect grasp on the past. So it was only by coincidence that he'd noticed the unnaturalness of the information about this person.

Minalis Folce Quartz. Back then, she'd been the ranked No. 2, the strongest in Alpha. Most Single Digit Magicmasters—including her—had lost their lives during the appearance of an SS-class Fiend, now referred to as the calamity. Almost no Magicmasters who fought back then were alive today.

Alus had noted an unusual cause of death recorded on the list of the deceased. It was just too vague and unclear. Even though she was supposed to have fought the SS-class Fiend Cronus, nobody knew how Minalis had died. It didn't even look like she'd gone missing in battle.

That caught his interest, and Alus asked for more information on her, but there wasn't much left. It was as if it had been deliberately erased by someone.

Meanwhile, around the same time, he came across some data on illegal

research that the top brass had been working on in secret. Among the data was information on immortality. At the time, Alus thought of it as nothing more than an impracticable theory. Even if the aging process could be slowed, it wasn't possible to extend someone's life expectancy by very much. That was just common sense.

However, there were no records on Minalis' characteristics or appearance. Not to mention that the noble Quartz family mansion had burned down in the past for some reason.

So Alus bringing up that name here was just to squash a last possibility. Even if it was a lie that she was in Alpha's military, he figured that there was some truth to it. Then there was the old-fashioned lethal magic she'd used. All in all, this was the result of him somewhat forcing together pieces of a puzzle using what information he had on Kurama.

But he'd never imagined that an old-style Magicmaster like this was alive, especially not someone who'd fought Cronus.

During the Demi Azur incident, Jean had fought two executives from Kurama. Assuming that Kurama had members originating from Alpha only made sense. Magicmasters were trained to serve in the military after all, and Alpha had long been renowned as a magical powerhouse.

Moreover, according to Jean's report, one of the two was skilled with the water attribute. That was why Alus made that assumption, but even he was surprised that he got it right.

It was like looking at a ghost. With that in mind, he spoke up again. "And here I was thinking there were some insane kids out there. You really let someone like Jean get too much information on you, granny. Is that big one that was with you not here today?"

"If he was, this institute would be covered in blood by now."

"I bet."

Elise was annoyed and tried to stay calm. There was something more important than Hazan, and that was... only she needed to know her secret. "You really are a frightening brat, Alus Reigin... I was only going to see how strong

you were. But now there's a change of plans. I'll kill you right here."

The overly dense mana began to turn to liquid. Elise hadn't really confirmed anything, but based on her attitude, Alus was convinced and decided there was no more use in arguing.

With technologies such as AWRs and the like, modern magic was far more advanced than in the past. As a researcher, he was sure of it. So as the current ranked No. 1, if he used his power, he should be able to handle Minalis, a survivor of the calamity.

"Try it." He raised his hand, beckoning her over with his index finger.

The next moment, Alus' mana overflowed like a muddy stream, blowing away Elise's mana that had filled their surroundings.

Even though a gag order was imposed to prevent an increase of hostages at the training grounds, rumors spread like wildfire.

The fact that Tesfia and Alice lost to their opponent spawned all kinds of theories among the students. It must've meant that a high-ranking Magicmaster had appeared and was taking part in the mock battles.

Eventually, the gossip shifted away from those two and onto the Magicmaster's next opponent, Alus. Any first-year student had heard that name at least once, be it in a good sense or bad sense. He was treated with great caution, but nobody approached him, and so the rumors about him took on a life of their own. The only thing agreed upon was the perception that they didn't understand him.

A handful of girls, though, had heard about Alus from Tesfia and Alice, so they had a better impression of him than the male students. And now he would fight the opponent they'd lost against.

Everyone believed it was a chance to see Alus' true worth that had been hidden behind a veil of mystery. At the very least, since he was always with Loki, who was second in the Institute after Felinella, he might have power on par with Tesfia and Alice. That's what most thought, and now they'd have a chance to find out.

Their expectations were even higher after hearing the rumor that Felinella called him the “number one” in the Institute. That was saying he was stronger than her, which was certainly controversial, so the best solution was to go see for themselves.

And so, some students abandoned their stalls to hurry over to the training grounds. As a result, the training grounds that were already at capacity were filled with a new wave of students.

Among them was the blonde transfer student that had enrolled after the tournament. Alus clearly remembered this noble girl, Lilisha Ron de Rimfuge Frusevan, as someone to keep a watch out for.

“I guess it can’t be helped. They’ve gotten this close, so I will have to step in too.” Unlike the other female students who were giddy with curiosity, Lilisha was biting her lip and furrowing her brows. “This throws a wrench into my plans,” she muttered to herself, before raising her head.

By then her expression was back to that of a normal student, an innocent student that didn’t know anything. And in a very blatant tone of voice, she said, “Speaking of all this... I remember hearing rumors that the ranked No. 1 is still young...”

“Wait!!” “Where did you hear that?!” “How old are they?!” The girls around Lilisha immediately asked for more.

“Oh, it’s just something I overheard someone say...” Lilisha vaguely said. She glanced over at a male student who was heading for the training grounds. And everyone around her followed suit.

A little while before the students began gathering, and a couple of minutes before Alus’ and Elise’s match began...

The barriers dividing up the training grounds were released, and everyone eagerly awaited the match that would take up the training grounds in their entirety.

Normally, the grounds were split into four arenas, so this felt rather large to Alus. He was reminded of when he’d lightly raked Tesfia over the coals when

she'd haughtily challenged him. That aside, despite the field being so large, it felt small. It was proof of how capable his opponent was.

In the case that Elise—Minalis—were to go on a rampage, the strength of the barrier around the training grounds had been raised to the maximum level to prevent any casualties, but it wasn't something that could be fully relied on.

Alus' duty here was to settle everything peacefully. The idea wasn't to overwhelm Elise but rather to render her harmless by removing her fangs and will to fight.

The best thing would be to turn her away without any casualties to the crowd. It seemed like a simple thing to do. But his opponent wasn't a normal magic criminal. She was in a league of her own, which was common ground they both shared.

At present, the audience and visitors to the festival were all hostages, and the risk was too big to make any careless moves. He understood he was asking the impossible of Sisty. Alus was the only Magicmaster who could deal with her without causing any more trouble. But that also meant shifting locations and relying on a number of military personnel.

Meanwhile, he also had an investment in this. He couldn't afford to lose his established place in the Institute, however noisy things were right now. Moreover, he wanted to avoid ruining the campus festival that Felinella was managing with a violent incident. It could very well turn into the site of a historical disaster.

For the time being, he would make this look like just another event at the festival. Since she hadn't brought that battle-crazed giant of a man with her, and he could feel that she wasn't looking for simple carnage, that seemed appropriate.

Moving locations was reasonable, but Elise had no reason to go along with it. ... *It'll probably be tricky.* It appeared that she knew Alus was hiding his power for some reason. She'd probably chosen the mock battles as a means to guarantee he couldn't run or hide, and using Tesfia and Alice as bait to provoke and lure him out was also meant to show her intentions.

Irritating as it was, his body had moved on its own back then. He couldn't stay

detached and overlook it. He did think her act was in poor taste, but there was no point in lamenting something that had already happened.

Alus sighed, but not even he knew why. Now that it had come to this, he'd have to do what he could. He wouldn't be able to get away with cutting corners.

He'd had the damage exchange system turned off so that Elise could experience his power firsthand, but also so he could focus on the battle. When it came to actual combat, the exchange system only got in the way of casting spells. And those black tails in particular would require him to sharpen his senses to their limit. That was what Alus thought to himself, as he waited for the buzzer to ring out.

Elise was following the rules and holding off on her attacks as well. That was one of the reasons behind his decision. If she wasn't willing to perform needless carnage, then there was still hope. If she came out of the match in one piece, she'd probably just leave.

Of course, it was still unclear how far she would go; and there was no denying there was some wishful thinking mixed in on his part.

Eventually, the buzzer rang out, interrupting his pointless thoughts.

He wasn't sure what to do. Even if she'd declared she would kill him, she wouldn't be able to. Something he could do was to give her a display of his power and let her know she was no match for him.

Alus knew he wouldn't be able to accomplish anything with half-baked measures, and it wasn't necessarily a good idea to just corner her here. *This'll be a pain. First, I should find out how much the barrier around the training grounds can take*, he thought to himself.

"Let's see what you've got, brat," Elise said with a joyful smile, as she thrust out her hand, bending her fingers in one at a time starting from her pinkie. Once closed, she opened her fist up to Alus. At the same time, a massive amount of water overflowed from her sleeve.

"«Aqua Dragon»"

Alus furrowed his brows at her words. This meant another bothersome spell

was coming. “Just where did you learn about this?”

When it came to summoning spells, manifesting power as a coiling dragon was an expert-level spell. Dragons were nonexistent, so that presented a problem when it came to imagining and constructing the information. Yet Elise was using Aqua Dragon as if to test the waters, so she wasn’t cutting Alus any slack.

The audience stirred immediately. The water dragon that appeared was easily taller than the third floor of the audience seats.

However, it seemed more like it had been a magic trick, as in the next moment it was surrounded by invisible walls and disappeared.

“As I thought, you can directly interfere with space,” Elise said with a laugh, as she looked at Alus, who’d brought his hands together to temper his mana.

“...” He’d known she was just testing him, but to think that was her intention... “You sure get right to the heart of the matter. I have things I want to hide too, you know.” As Alus said this, the supposedly crushed Aqua Dragon reformed itself at a high speed.

That meant his spell before had been meaningless, but he wasn’t particularly surprised. He’d wanted to show that he could deal with the water dragon even if it meant risking his space manipulation magic getting found out. If possible, he hoped to not only keep her in check but to limit her options.

An indeterminate form of summons was troublesome enough. Since physical attacks wouldn’t work, they needed to be hit with magic that exceeded their strength, not to mention that someone from the audience could sneak in a move as well.

Even so, the reformed Aqua Dragon still needed to be dealt with. Now reborn, it opened its mouth wide and flew at Alus.

He jumped back to gain some distance, but—

The dragon missed him, but as its jaw smashed into the ground and burst, it sent out large amounts of water that changed direction in midair and assaulted Alus. It even accelerated, as if it had only bounced off of the ground to gain momentum.

Alus ended up getting targeted in midair, but for him it wasn't an opening. He drew Night Mist as if he'd expected it. And with the satisfying sound of its chain rattling, he passed mana through it. Against any respectable magic, a physical defense wouldn't amount to much.

When it came to the water attribute, it was standard to fight back with the lightning attribute, but it was hard to believe his opponent wouldn't take such a commonplace measure into account. He messed with spells himself, after all. A summoned beast had a core that supplied it with mana, so in a sense, a summon with an indeterminate form would be indestructible so long as the core was protected.

In particular, the core of the water dragon could be freely controlled by its user. Even the Dimension Thrust he'd used to save Tesfia and Alice would be pointless if it didn't hit the core. That's why he instead chose a different spell.

“*«Mistlotein»*” By constructing and then canceling Niflheim in its initial stage in his mind, he transformed mana into liquid nitrogen. He then sprayed the massive amounts of crystallized liquid nitrogen from his blade as if it was mist.

It seemed rather chancy with a huge water dragon weighing far more than him closing in. Even as he swung his AWR in a cross, the pure white mist would only block the dragon's vision.

But Mistlotein's true value hadn't shown itself yet. It would appear when the crystallized form came in contact with an object. And just as the water dragon was about to swallow Alus whole, it flew into the curtain of mist, which froze at an explosive rate, freezing the entire dragon.

Meanwhile, Elise calmly watched it happen. Indeed, she couldn't have him fall to a mere Aqua Dragon. If that was all he could handle, there would have been no reason to come.

She smiled as she stared at her completely frozen water dragon. “That's my first time seeing that spell. It's similar to Niflheim, but in the end, it's...!!” Her eyes narrowed, as she watched Alus land on the tip of the water dragon's frozen nose.

“It's been a while since I last used it, but it went pretty well. This spell doesn't end here.” Mistlotein eroded the mana that composed spells itself. It spread

explosively, enveloping mana in crystals. As such, it was extremely effective against spells that used mana as a catalyst.

Alus immediately got to work constructing an elaborate new spell and cast it on the water dragon. He used not only the eroded mana of the dragon's core, but also infused it with even more mana. After his battle with Demi Azur, his stores of mana easily surpassed twice what he had before. So there was a need even to expel this excess mana. Even though he'd grown accustomed to it, having overwhelmingly large amounts of mana was still unstable.

"Now it's my turn to put on a show... Rebirthing flames, ‹‹*Phoenix*››" The frozen water dragon flashed red before the ice burst, evaporating in midair before returning to mana particles.

Alus' summoning spell was gleaned from a Lost Spell using technology of the old world. It was a spell nobody but him could reproduce, and it wasn't recorded in the spell encyclopedia either.

The phoenix, spreading its wings, glowed with red-hot flames. As its caster, Alus wasn't affected by the fire, but if a barrier hadn't surrounded the training grounds, the audience would've received more than just simple burns.



Elise was no exception. However, she'd already taken measures to avoid the magical heat. She covered herself in a film of mana, and the mana she'd thrown off to enhance her water attribute spells remained airborne to protect her. She might feel the heat but was taking next to no damage.

She was fascinated by the sublime sight for a moment. Then she started laughing. "Hehe, extraordinary, heretical, ingenious, monstrous... all of them are too weak to describe you! You're far beyond any measuring standards... but I won't fall behind to a brat who's only been alive for some 15 years. I gave up my own humanity a long time ago."

Elise ripped the bandage from her arm with her teeth. From the glimpses Alus could see between the gaps, he realized his prediction had been spot on. *She has magic formulas carved directly into her arm.*

It was theoretically possible, certainly. In fact, it would be the most effective method. But it should have been a pointless act. Carving formulas directly into the skin wouldn't do much, as it would peel off within a few days and be replaced with a new layer of skin.

Not to mention that the skin would slacken over the years, losing its elasticity. So the magic formula's composition would also loosen, which would affect the details—a fatal flaw for something that required delicate precision.

But for some reason, that didn't seem to apply to Elise. The magic formulas on her arm were functioning just fine. That much was clear from her fighting so far. They also didn't appear to be freshly carved, as the way she handled her magic spoke volumes of her experience in fighting with them. Even as Alus watched, the magic formula glowed a pale blue color.

"Thank you for the gift you've given me in return. I think it's only fair that I respond to a summon with another summon... It might get a little tight in here, but you don't mind, do you?"

As Elise finished speaking, a massive round film of water appeared behind her. Even though it only occupied a very thin area of space, its surface shimmered endlessly in black and deep blue colors, as if it was a mirror reflecting the depths of the sea. At the same time, it also seemed like a massive opening that was connected to the ocean itself.

With a fearless smile, she thrust her hand forward and loudly shouted, “Fulfill your mission of slaughtering anyone who stands in my way, king of the abyss and demon of the distant seas, be unleashed upon all... <<Leviathan>>”

“—!!” Suddenly, Alus saw something stir in the film of water. It was tremendous... at the same time, the film’s surface was violently disturbed, and a deep heavy echo shook the atmosphere.

The loud vibrating sound reverberated within the depths of one’s body. The audience held their collective breath as they gazed at the film that seemed like a gate to the seas. Some nearly choked from the ominous foreboding energy, but no one could take their eyes off of it.

It felt like a long time passed, but in reality, it was only two or three seconds. And when it appeared from the film, everyone forgot to breathe. The unrealistic sight looked like something from a fairy tale or myth.

Answering Elise’s call was a legendary creature. Breaking through the film, the wicked face came into the open. Rumor had it that ancient monsters still lurked beneath the seas, and its appearance certainly lent credibility to the rumors. What came from the depths had a horrible otherworldly visage, but in a different sense from a Fiend.

The first thing that stood out was a sharp horn. Following that were countless sharp teeth in disarray, reflecting silvery light like polished blades. It had no eyes, and its face was that of an ugly, distorted, and deformed water dragon.

Two arms forcibly thrust out of the membrane, as if tearing through the edges of the hole. Sickle-like protrusions on the arms pierced deeply into the ground to help it crawl out. Each time it wriggled to pull its body out, the ground shook.

Everyone in the audience watched with bated breath as the full extent of the giant monster was revealed. It was so large it even dwarfed the Phoenix. Like Elise said, it was as if it was too big to fit within the training grounds.

Alus had no knowledge of this spell, or rather this monstrous being, but faced with its size, he felt impatience. The audience probably didn’t doubt they were safe, but if the Phoenix and Leviathan were to seriously clash, the training grounds—and maybe even the entire Institute—would be in danger. He might have been the one to pull the trigger, but... *Tsk, I underestimated her!* To think

a summoned creature that exceeded the Phoenix would appear...

He raised his caution of Elise to the maximum. The ability of Singles was rewritten with every generation. It was generally accepted that Singles of the past were inferior to even the Doubles of today, but that was largely because knowledge and technology concerning magic had seen dramatic development.

But it was clear that this summoning spell, and the monster it brought forth, wasn't something so easily opposed even by a Single. If anything—*Is there anyone in the military today that would stand a chance against this aside from Lettie or me? ... No.* Alus couldn't help but conclude this upon seeing Elise's display of force. Kurama executives were said to be on par with Single Digit Magicmasters, but it appeared that wasn't enough to describe her.

He'd hoped that she would go wild in some other nation and not here, but nothing would come from complaining about it. Leviathan was a trump card that exceeded the realm of summoning magic. Stunned or not, Alus carefully observed its construction, or rather he sensed it. Considering the scale of the summon, it should take quite a bit of time to complete.

Now's my chance...! Before Leviathan had fully appeared, Alus built an extra program into Phoenix. The next moment, with a high-pitched screech, the divine bird flapped its wings of flame, sending a heat wave sweeping over the training grounds.

Flying over to Leviathan, it swooped down fast, hoping to slam its massive body into the ground. Flapping its wings, it scorched the air, accelerating downward. As it aimed, it crashed into Leviathan from above. A pillar of fire rose like a volcano erupting. At the same time, a large amount of steam filled the arena.

"Hmm, I was almost there, but it's already over." From the steam came Elise's disappointed voice. "Now then, next is..."

"I have no intentions of playing along with your games!" Alus' voice sounded out, as if to erase Elise's mutterings.

She glanced behind her, in the direction the voice had come from, as she bent down. "—!!" Night Mist soared above her head, cutting through the steam. "I'm not all that fond of close combat, you see," she grumbled, as she instantly

created a blade of water in her right hand, slashing behind her. However, there was no response.

“I see. It seems you’re not lying,” Alus’ ridiculing voice came from the side this time.

Elise remained expressionless, creating another blade of water in her left hand to slash with that as well. Yet she only cut through air once more. Sensing she was at a disadvantage while being unable to see from all the steam, she unleashed a burst of mana into the ground. With her in the center, the steam disappeared in a circle around her.

However... “—!!” Alus was nowhere to be found. A chill ran down her spine as she sensed a presence from above, and her vision darkened for a moment.

She instinctively turned her head up and clicked her tongue at the weapon that was right upon her and intercepted it with her blade of water. Then, recalling how Alus had cut through space itself, she realized her mistake. But thanks to her experience, she was able to react immediately.

She wouldn’t be able to block Alus’ Night Mist with her water blade. So she instantly canceled her spell and kicked off the ground, while twisting her body diagonally upwards to avoid a fatal blow. Even Elise felt a cold sweat as she heard the strange sound emitted by Night Mist as it passed by her side.

After landing on a knee, she reaffirmed that dodging had been the right choice. She took a closer look at the area where Alus’ slash had passed through. It was hard to believe what she was seeing. It appeared that space itself had been displaced along the trajectory that Night Mist traveled, though it soon reversed and healed itself. “I see. So this is a Single in this day and age.”

Alus’ close combat skills and magic techniques were far above the Singles that Elise knew. But that wasn’t all. Taking the audience hostage was working in her favor, as Alus didn’t seem intent on completely cornering her, but even so—that attack was unexpected.

In other words... he was coldhearted and ruthless. It certainly wasn’t intended to be a finishing blow. But Elise knew that he’d have been fine if she’d failed to dodge it and had died.

She'd thought that modern Magicmasters were soft, so knowing that the ranked No. 1, standing at the top of them all, wouldn't hesitate to kill, was a pleasant miscalculation. She had killed more people than she could count... the result of her becoming a criminal and seeking revenge. Meanwhile, the Magicmasters that walked the path of light would hesitate the moment before they killed, even if they were Single Digits.

So each was beyond what the other expected. Nevertheless, Elise glanced down at herself and sighed. "I really can't say I'm good with close combat."

She had a small body with short limbs, which was part of it, but more than anything, she didn't have an AWR, leaving her with only magic to protect herself. Then again, against the ability to cut through space itself, not even an AWR would help.

Elise's tactics typically consisted of fighting at medium to long range, keeping the enemy from getting too close. However, that was only practical against a weaker opponent, or at worst an opponent of equal strength. So clashing against someone that might be superior to her brought about a sense of urgency for the first time in decades.

"This'll be rough. Talk about an annoying spell... rendering defense useless in close combat." Ignoring her rush of emotions, Elise calmly analyzed the sticky situation she was in, as if she was talking about someone else. "However—that's all there is to it!"

She looked to be distancing herself at first but stepped forward towards Alus as she spoke. At the same time, she pulled her arms behind her as if to hide the water blades in her hands. Realizing her disadvantage, she chose to push against it, challenging him to close combat of her own accord.

Surprised by the unexpected move, Alus' reaction was slightly delayed. He'd taken her specialty into consideration and been on guard against a long-range magic battle, so Elise had outwitted him. For the time being, he too moved forward to throw off her timing. As a result, they closed in on each other in an instant.

He blocked Elise's blade of water, repelling it. As it was made from magic, it was open to be transformed or altered through other forms of trickery when

they clashed.

He felt a heavy impact, like metal clashing against metal. But that wasn't all. Without delay, the second attack came flying from Elise's other hand.

Even against two blades, Alus wasn't going to fall behind with Night Mist. As a result of his blocking the first attack, the chain flew in the air. Against the second attack, he stretched the chain out to shield him.

The chain in the air became a sturdy shield to protect him from Elise's attack... or so it should have. But as the chain and the water blade were about to connect, Elise flicked her wrist.

Tsk! Alus clicked his tongue in his mind, as the shape of the water blade was undone before it touched the chain. It became liquid water and harmlessly passed through the chain wall. Shortly thereafter the liquid burst, turning into multiple water bullets that attacked Alus.

Elise had flicked her wrist like a whip to change her water blade and to give the water bullets speed. The water bullets were coated in a thin layer of mana. Fortunately, the water blade had been moving in a sweeping motion, so they flew in a straight line.

Alus bent over and dodged them. Naturally, he was vigilant against the water blade. Since she wasn't using an enchantment but instead created the blade through magic, she was rather skilled. At the same time, it was easy to change, and he knew this kind of change was possible, which was why the water bullets were within expectations.

But against this opponent, he didn't want to be on the defensive. He removed the chain's fixed coordinates he'd set to create the shield and made use of his bent-over posture to kick up against his opponent's face.

Close combat was a battle of reading the other's intentions. The point was to corner the opponent so they couldn't evade. And it all started with overcoming the opponent's expectations.

Alus saw the hem of a red robe at the top of his vision. At the top of his vision... meaning that his kick hadn't connected.

Jumping and dodging the attack, Elise twisted her hip and rotated to give Alus

a kick in return from the air. Repeatedly, at that. One blow, two blows... Alus crossed his arms to protect himself and felt heavy impacts striking them. Through a gap between his arms, he could see Elise's robe tossing about in a torrent of red, as she changed her posture in midair and unleashed a third kick below his crossed arms.

"Tsk..." Alus was sent flying. But he recovered his form and kicked the ground once to kill the momentum, landing without any panic in his expression.

He'd thrown his right palm in the way of the last kick, so the damage he took was relatively small. At the very least it cushioned the attack, but even now his hand was still numb.

During the exchange, Alus became convinced that she understood Dimension Thrust's drawbacks. Like Elise said, Dimension Thrust was impossible to defend against in close combat. However, the spell called for precise compositional requirements, plus an understanding of space itself, so it took some work. Meaning that it wasn't something that could be built up in an instant. So while he could use it for attacking, Alus couldn't use Dimension Thrust for defense, where decisions needed to be made in the blink of an eye.

It wasn't something that could be fixed by pouring more mana into it. And missing his target was something he needed to be careful about. This wasn't some slow-moving floating ball of water or sluggish Fiend.

But more importantly... A line of blood ran down from the edge of his mouth. "Now you've done it, granny. Not good at it?" Indeed, when it came to close combat, Elise was one step above.

"I just don't like using unintelligent moves. I never said I was bad at it, brat." Lifting the corners of her mouth, Elise smiled wickedly.

The students forgot to breathe as they watched the battle, and they were forced to recognize that in the end, rumors were just rumors.

The battle far exceeded expectations. Those who were inexperienced would struggle to even pick up any details. They had difficulty telling what the two combatants were even doing. The novice and intermediate spells they knew

were no comparison for what they were seeing.

It was only natural that they'd imagine this was the kind of battle they would see with two Single Digits fighting. In fact, most students had never seen a Single Digit Magicmaster fight before. At most, they could only compare it to the fighting styles of the best Magicmasters they knew. The back and forth was so high level, the magic so diverse.

Suddenly, one of the female students in a group spoke up. "This is *inhuman*."

Meanwhile, Delca Base, who'd been sent out in Felinella's place to deliver Alus' message, stood stiffly with a tense face as he saluted the principal, who had her back to him.

When he'd knocked and stepped inside the principal's office, she already had her staff in hand and was in the middle of doing something. The room, which doubled as an office, was filled with an unusual amount of mana. Perhaps because of that pressure, Delca felt like his clothes were heavy, as if they were soaked.

Seeing the clothing she wore made Delca swallow by reflex. She was already wearing the combat outfit she'd worn when she was still in active duty.

"Delca, Alus is fighting at the training grounds right now, isn't he?" Her back still faced the door, as she looked out the window.

"Y-Yes, I have a message from him." Having waited for the right moment, Delca finally got the chance to convey it. However, he couldn't leave the room until he received either permission or new instructions. That was something taught to him during his time in the military. Or rather, as nobility, it was something he already knew.

Considering the fact that she wore her combat clothing, the principal probably understood the situation better than him. She was muttering to herself, but he was able to pick up what she was saying. "Preparations will take a little more time. Why did it have to happen now? ...Knowing him, there's some idea behind it. But the barrier around the training grounds probably won't last..."

Delta figured she'd probably already sent a report to the military. Next would

be telling the Governor-General about the additional personnel to capture the intruder that Alus had requested. “Once she’s this close, there’s nothing we can do. It’s not like she’d be happy to leave if asked... this is nothing but trouble.” It appeared the principal was irritated enough to be grinding her teeth.

It was the first time Delca had seen the principal like this, though he realized this was an emergency. She seemed to be on the verge of erupting, but when she turned to Delca, she’d calmed down a bit.

A male teacher stood next to Delca. He was the spokesperson for the Institute’s public event briefing, and he was waiting impatiently. But the briefing would likely be canceled.

The principal turned to the teacher first, prioritizing the most important matter. It was for times like these that the faculty existed. They could all use magic to some degree. If all it took was intelligence, a non-Magicmaster would have worked fine as well. “Gather as much of the faculty as you can and bring them to the training grounds.”

“Yes. So what should we do?”

“Raise an anti-magic barrier, of course. With everyone there, you should be able to last until I can make it over there.”

“Of course. But is the mock battle that problematic?”

“Just get going already!”

The teacher ran out of the office in a hurry. Using his license, it would be possible to make an emergency call to the Institute’s entire faculty. They’d probably also make a call over the broadcast system using a channel the students had no access to. Though there were plenty of students already at the training grounds.

After that, the principal turned her gaze back to Delca. He froze, as if stared down by a deadly serpent. “Positioning any more guards outside will be difficult. It’ll still be a while before the military Magicmasters arrive. Did Alus say something about that?”

Loki was already on guard at Alus’ orders, but Delca didn’t know that. He shook his head, as he only had the bare minimum of information. Felinella had

been asked to deliver the message herself, so it couldn't be helped. "I'm sorry."

After hearing Delca deliver the message, Sisty began to guess at what Alus was thinking and what he would do in this situation. Moreover, what was the intention behind the message he left?

It turned out just like she feared. She's always been soft when it comes to Alus. Well, it's not like I can't understand. Sisty thought back to her subordinate, who'd encountered a suspicious intruder beforehand. She'd been unconscious for a while, and when she came to, she immediately contacted Sisty. In addition to informing Sisty of the situation, she also raised the Institute's alert level to the max and urged Sisty to make her move.

The subordinate had also mentioned Alus for some reason. She always worried about him on some subconscious level, having a motherly side to her, even though she'd only been on a few missions with Alus in the past.

After hearing the report, Sisty had begun to prepare, but it seemed she was running behind. For the time being, she returned to trying to figure out the intention behind Alus' message.

The problem was that Alus wanted her captured outside the Institute. Of course, under normal circumstances, it should have been easy for him to capture anyone. And here was an opponent he couldn't...

There didn't seem to be anything to doubt about the information, but it didn't feel fully accurate either. "I would have wanted more details in this message."

"Excuse me?"

Sisty, noticing that she'd voiced her internal complaint out loud, waved her hand at Delca as if saying not to worry about it. "Ms. Felinella asked you to let the match continue, didn't she?"

"Yes. I believe she wanted the festival to go on. If the crowd gets aggravated and starts to panic, it would be yet another disaster."

Of course, it must have been a decision based on Alus' thoughts. And Sisty had hoped to glean a little more of his intentions from that. He must not want the festival stopped for some reason. For the time being, the faculty would go and raise a barrier and prevent casualties, and Sisty herself would leave here

once her preparations were done.

And if Alus wanted the festival to continue on, Sisty would abide by his decision. She trusted the current ranked No. 1. Like Delca said, cracking down on the intruder in front of the public wasn't a wise idea. In that sense, there was little they could've done until she herself had been notified and could get involved.

For starters, the training grounds would have to be isolated to stop even more people from gathering there. And there was only one person in the Institute who could pull that off flawlessly.

Of course, Alus would want to get the intruder to leave the training grounds, so Sisty would take that into account. However, it seemed this intruder was quite the powerhouse. So even Alus would need to do some heavy lifting.

"Delca, return to the training grounds for now and support Ms. Felinella."

"U-Understood. And what about..." He couldn't help but wonder what the principal—the top authority in the Institute and a former Single—would do.

"We'll leave the pursuit to the military reinforcements like Alus said, but I'm confident in my defensive magic. I'll get to the training grounds as soon as I can."

The former Single, once known as one of the Three Pillars, was finally stepping onto the battlefield. Despite Delca's excitement over her magnificent appearance, he kept his composure and responded with a clear voice, "Understood!!" He turned on his heel and headed out the door.

Once he reached the training grounds, the battle Delca saw taking place there blew his mind. It was enough to end his elated mood in an instant. He now knew how a mere first-year student could give orders to the principal, who was a former Single Digit Magicmaster.

At the same time, his eyes met with Felinella's. She was in the commentator booth on the second floor. He gave her a look that said he'd delivered the message. Of course, commentating on every move in a battle of this level was impossible; she was just there in case an announcement needed to be made.

After that, Delca, watching the battle, unconsciously let some words slip out.

“He really is...”

After some exchanges, Alus was starting to feel a little impatient in spite of his initial confidence.

Even after going this far, Elise showed no signs of backing down. During their moves back and forth, he'd fought in a way that told her that she couldn't kill him, but she'd brushed it off and continued to fight.

At this point, intermediate or advanced magic wasn't going to cut it. No matter how refined Alus' magic might be, with the opponent being in the same realm as him, they were stuck in a stalemate.

However, Elise likely wouldn't use summoning magic anymore. Leviathan, which must have been her biggest trump card, was troublesome to deal with. It almost resulted in a ton of casualties, but now that it had been cut down, she would probably avoid wasting any more mana.

Moreover, Alus' message to the principal should have reached her by now. Until Sisty made her move, he'd need the training grounds barrier to last, meaning he couldn't afford to let any of his powerful magic hit the barrier. If possible, he also wanted to cancel out his opponent's spells.

Space manipulation magic would also be tricky to use. It took a lot of mana, not to mention that the arena was once again starting to fill with Elise's dense mana, which made it difficult to accurately construct—or rather, the distortion itself had become more difficult to perform.

He also realized that Elise understood how it worked and had seen through its weakness. *Guess I'll have to avoid using magic as much as possible.* Anything above intermediate and advanced magic would have too large of an effect on the barrier.

Alus could use all the attributes, but in return he lacked precise control of them, a drawback that was coming back to bite him now. It was actually a side effect originally from having too much power.

That meant his tactics were limited. *Close combat is the only way to go... but it doesn't change the fact that we're getting nowhere.*

Alus pulled his chain and began casting a spell he wasn't overly familiar with. The magic formula on the chain belonged to the wind attribute, a type he rarely used. The basics aside, wind attribute spells weren't as simple as they looked. Few of the spells could be used just by studying and training. Put another way, they were spells that relied heavily on intuition. Consciously controlling wind required more than just knowledge of wind speed and other factors. It was something you had to get a feel for.

Because of that, he couldn't use wind riding, which was common among its users. And surprisingly enough, he couldn't use the mana sonar that Loki did, or Force, which converted mana into electricity inside the body. Those types of spells required a proper affinity for them.

Which was why the spell Alus was going to use was something rarely used for its original purpose and didn't rely on senses. It was a spell that could be cast simply by going through the proper process.

He designated coordinates and envisioned a sphere, the wind inside spinning around in a chaotic manner, without direction.

“*«Ashird»*”

The sphere appeared in the air, and inside was a tornado of mana, trapped inside of a round shell. It used its rotational speed to suck in everything, even mana. Moreover, the sphere grew bigger the more mass and mana it took in, increasing its suction power. It was a spell that grew on its own, but it affected even its caster.

Skilled as she was, Elise was very familiar with this spell, and she held down her hair and robe as she read Alus' intentions... No, there was no need for that. This was a spell a Magicmaster who preferred hand to hand combat would use. In other words, it was a sign that he was coming in for close combat.

Ashird was annoying for Magicmasters that preferred long-range combat because of its mana-absorbing property. Just using magic while under the influence of this special tornado would suck some of your mana out.

Also, the powerful suction distorted the mana, making it difficult to designate and maintain magic coordinates. This meant that spells wouldn't last while the tornado was around. It also meant that Elise filling the area with her mana to

keep Alus from using his space manipulation magic was meaningless.

Then there was the aforementioned growth of the sphere, making magic more and more difficult the longer the fight lasted. So the ones that preferred close combat would gradually obtain more of an advantage.

Despite all of that, Elise's mouth twisted in amusement and turned to a sadistic smile. *You're too soft. Not being able to use magic goes both ways... also, Ashird's structure is weak. So that tornado will go away just by hitting it with a strong spell. Did you think I'd just go along with your game?*

Shortly thereafter, Elise's footing turned muddy. She'd transformed her mana into water, and it came up from the ground. Next, two water tornadoes rose up into the air.

The moment everyone in the audience saw that—

The water tornadoes burst, and unable to maintain their form, they returned to mana and were sucked up by Ashird.

Elise's goal was to have Ashird absorb water mana and disrupt its structure from the inside. Then she saw a flash of lightning coming in from the corner of her eye. In the moment she was focused on Ashird, Alus had come up right next to her, pressing in on her with Night Mist.

"...!" Lightning was exceedingly effective against water. However, any skilled Magicmaster would have countermeasures prepared and could make up for any weakness by adding in extra factors while constructing their spell. That said, it would only compensate for it, and most of the time it wasn't enough to overcome a poor match-up.

"I've gone out of my way to use wind magic. I can't let you destroy it so easily," Alus said, as he transformed the mana coating Night Mist into electricity.

Lightning Blade electricity covered Night Mist, preventing the energy from spontaneously discharging and dispersing. If it was discharged in extreme situations, the electricity could be sent out following an attack like a shockwave. Being able to cover short distances as well as long distances was one of Lightning Blade's advantages. Moreover, it was possible to adjust the power by

changing the amount of electricity.

The sound of electricity crackling through the air pierced the ears of the audience. Elise tried to step back to get away, but Alus moved in even faster, closing the distance.

In the midst of jumping backwards, Elise calmly crossed her arms. Like before, twin tornadoes of water rose in conjunction with her arm movements and expanded outward, trying to take Alus with them.

However—with a thunderclap, the tops of the tornadoes burst.

Elise huffed in exasperation, glaring at Alus. She should have expected as much. Not only was there the attribute match-up, but Ashird was also sucking up the mana, creating openings for both of them.

Alus' spell was equally fragile. Immediately, a torrent of water overflowed from Elise's surroundings, creating a massive water tornado in an instant. She then seemed to disappear into the center of it.

Alus expressionlessly slashed at the tornado with Night Mist, splitting it in half. When the tornado dispersed, Elise was gone, as he'd expected. She'd used the tornado to gain footing and to buy time, as she'd escaped up into the air again.

But her disadvantage wasn't reversed. In this situation, she was limited in her moves against Alus since his Lightning Blade could be shot out faster than anything she could do. And he wasn't going to give her the time needed to resist the lightning attribute. So no matter what she did...

Alus braced himself a little, but when he saw Elise wasn't doing anything in the air, he gave her a suspicious look. True, it was pointless to try and do anything by now. But she shouldn't be the kind of person that would accept that. And she should have a card or two she could still play.

So he decided to make the first move, aiming for the moment she landed.

Elise, on the other hand, didn't even look shocked, as she remained motionless upon landing and stared at Alus.

Alus moved in, and in reaction she spread her arms. Not as a means to oppose

him, but seemingly as if accepting her fate.

He wasn't going to stop. He swung down Lightning Blade at Elise. With deafening thunder, the diagonally swung blade was sucked into her chest. "—!!"

There was no resistance whatsoever. He didn't feel like he'd cut into a person at all. It was like hitting nothing but air. He also saw transparent liquid shoot out from the cut, rather than blood.

Elise's hand firmly grabbed his wrist. She then showed an eerie smile, her face seeming to melt and fall off.

"Tsk—!!" The audience was breathless at the grotesque sight, the only sound in the arena being Alus clicking his tongue. By the time he realized he'd fallen into a trap, it was too late.

The fake Elise made from water transformed, shifting from human to amoeba, with a tentacle-like appendage still holding onto Alus' wrist. Mana running through it or not, it was hard to believe it was originally made from water when it was this strong. If he tried to brute-force it, he'd probably lose.

In a pinch, Alus looked at Ashird still spinning around in the air. It was still functioning, but Elise's water tornadoes had slowed down its growth. At this moment it wouldn't be able to absorb all of the mana around it.

A strange mud-like sludge began bubbling and rippling as if something was pushing up from below. The next moment, sharp water spikes shot up from the sludge.

There was no time to be picky about what spell to use. Alus constructed a certain spell and released it in front of him, stabbing Night Mist into the sludge.

An explosion occurred. He'd cast a small-scale Detonation from inside of the eerie sludge. The shockwave also sent Alus flying, but he recovered in midair and landed on his feet.

Eventually, the steam that filled the area cleared up to reveal an expressionless Alus and a small figure in a robe. The real Elise, who had hidden herself somewhere, stood there with her eyes wide open—but in the next moment she smiled.

“Ahahaha, hehe... Ah, sorry, I guess that scared you. You used a pretty exaggerated spell, but it wasn’t all that dangerous.” Considering the situation, the way her laugh shook her whole body, as she stood with her arms around her stomach, was inappropriate... but coupled with her small frame and girly appearance, she looked the picture of innocence.

Immediately, an electric shock shot out as if in response to her ridicule, but Elise easily blocked the attack that Alus had silently let loose. A tail suddenly appeared from her back and quickly swept it away as if barely paying attention to it. She must have cast it while Alus was dealing with her fake. At the same time, the other tails rose up into the air and snapped like whips, cutting Ashird in half.

A strong wind blew down on the training grounds from Ashird, along with the mana it contained.

Alus pursed his lips, irritated, as he gazed at Elise, who had four massive tails hanging in the air. He didn’t want to let her use that spell. Looking at them properly now, he could tell they were so overwhelmingly powerful that they were beyond the expert-level category.

Incidentally, the reason he’d used slightly excessive firepower to escape the trap was because it was his first time seeing that type of spell. Holding back against an unknown spell could very quickly lead to death. And it couldn’t be helped that his arm ended up slightly toasty in the process.

The same applied in the Outer World. Nothing bad could come from being cautious, especially when the spell was cast by someone on the level of a Single Digit Magicmaster.

However, Alus soon figured out when she’d traded places with her copy. He’d never taken his eyes off of her, aside from when the twin water tornadoes appeared. It was only in that moment that his focus shifted away from her. It was the only time she could have switched places.

Alus assumed she must have left her copy behind, and then moved to some blind spot while blending in with the tornadoes. Creating a standin using magic wasn’t impossible. Those with an earth affinity could use a spell that created an exact lookalike of themselves.

Sensing what was going on in Alus' mind, Elise maintained a creepy, superior smile. The massive black tails rising up from her lower back covered all of the space above her tiny body and slowly swayed as if to tease Alus.

But behind her fearless attitude, she felt a cold tingle at Alus' sharp stare. *I guess he'll find out if I use it anymore*, she thought to herself. She narrowed her eyes, a sense of impatience welling up.

For the time being, Elise took deep breaths and restored her disturbed flow of mana. Still, how long had it been since she'd felt irritated like this? Trying to hide her slight unrest, she opened her mouth to speak, as if saying her superiority was eternal and she could kill Alus any time she wanted. "So, are you done already?"

Just as she said that, the barrier around the training grounds became sturdier. She quickly guessed from the mana that more than twenty rather skilled people were lined up and reinforcing the barrier. They were probably the Institute's faculty members.

There were some in the audience who looked confused, but the staff ignored them and continued to pour mana into the barrier.

At the same time, an announcement was made. "Attention. As the battle heats up, we are reinforcing the barrier just in case."

In addition to Felinella's notification, the crowd's attention was drawn to the large four-sided screen that came down from the ceiling. Restrictions had already been put in place, but nobody in the audience knew what was going on. They were all totally absorbed in the mock battle.

What would they do next? What would they show them? How great would their next feats of magic be? The existence of countless Fiends in the Outer World got pushed to a corner of their minds. They couldn't take their eyes off of the two on the training grounds.

Some unintentionally crushed their cups in their hands, soaking their clothing. A boy with his parents stared at the two Magicmasters with admiration in his eyes. But it wasn't just him. Everyone was passionately watching the match.

Even the students shared the sentiment. "That's really Alus, isn't it...?" a

female classmate of Alus' asked her friend next to her, without taking her eyes off the match.

"Y-Yeah..."

"No way, Alus just did average on the exams, didn't he?"

"Yeah. But to fight like this, you'd have to be..." Even though the girl wasn't drinking anything, she unconsciously gulped.

All of the Institute's students probably shared the same feeling. They thought that this match rivaled what Single Digit Magicmasters could do. Though that was only natural, since the highest measure they knew were Singles.

The students tended to overestimate things based on their narrow perspective, but this time they were right on the mark. In fact, it was a match that even went beyond the limits of imagination.

At the same time, they thought back to the rumors of Alpha's ranked No. 1 that they heard the other day. Meaning that their thoughts couldn't help but drift in that direction, despite the lack of any proof.

They had only one unshakable belief. And that was that the title of the strongest one, the one who stood at the top of all Magicmasters, the one who was above more than 100,000 others, the No. 1 they dreamed about...could be whoever was left standing at the end of this match... Those who thought that way were looking at Alus and Elise with admiration.

Just which of them was the rumored ranked No. 1...?

However, the female students were more inclined to believe it was the familiar and mysterious Alus rather than the intruder Elise they were seeing for the first time. It was an unconscious bias, but the girls were too fixated on the match to notice.

Meanwhile, Alus was unaware that his secret was at risk of being exposed and instead was considering whether he should go along with Elise's obvious provocation.

At any rate, he had no intention of haphazardly cornering her. While he didn't

let it show on his face to keep her from catching on, the thing he wanted to avoid at all costs was the audience getting caught up in her self-destruction or indiscriminate slaughter. He was playing along with the farce because he wanted to let her realize her disadvantage and just flee the scene.

Yet... in the midst of battle, Alus could no longer deny the joy he was feeling as a Magicmaster. Even Elise's provocations sounded like the drum beats to war, stirring up his will to fight.

That said, he remained calm. He wasn't the type to be moved by emotions. If he had to describe his situation, he'd say he was happy to have met a worthy opponent... finally. He was finally able to compete with a person and not a Fiend, using the power that he'd trained up.

The fact that the barrier was being reinforced by the teachers also added to his quiet elation. Sensing that the risk to the audience was now reduced, Alus disengaged some of his self-imposed limitations on his power. However, even so, he couldn't exactly use expert-level spells like Niflheim that rewrote the laws of the world. But lifting the restriction on several spells at least was a welcome thing.

"No, I'm only getting started," Alus bluntly answered Elise's question. The fearless smile on his face wasn't that of a student but of the ranked No. 1, backed by everything he'd experienced in the Outer World and the military.

Right now, Alus' brain was working at high speed. There were no problems. His atmosphere was mysteriously calm, his mind clear. *You've taken me for a ride so far, but it's time for me to show what I have up my sleeve... First, I'll need to figure out exactly how that spell works.*

Sirislata, the spell Alice used in her battle against Elise, was faster than a human's reaction time. She might still be inexperienced, but even a Double would struggle to do more than just barely dodge it.

Not even Alus would have time to prepare a spell if he lost the initiative. But the fact that Elise could lose the momentum but still easily crush spells meant that those tails probably moved at extreme speeds. Even he would have a hard time catching them.

Suddenly, he pointed the tip of Night Mist at Elise and spoke. "How about

this?” And the space around them twisted as countless swords made from mana appeared.

“That’s my first time seeing that. Interesting, give it your best shot.” The four tails swishing through the air resembled a dog wagging its tail out of happiness.

There were close to 200 short swords around Alus, hanging in the air and waiting for the moment of their release. It was a spell composed of the essence of space manipulation magic.

“*«Oboro Hien»*”

The moment he spoke the spell name, the jet-black Night Mist clones shot out all at once. They were all aimed at Elise, and even if the target tried to dodge, they would follow.

Yet Elise didn’t take a single step, as if she didn’t even feel the need to dodge.

Alus expected as much. His spell was intended to test the limits of her tails.

Elise bent forward and focused on her tails. Each tail moved independently and smashed the short swords. Though it would be more accurate to say they were being crushed. The tails didn’t let a single one through as they pulverized the constructs themselves.

CLANG. One of the swords touched a tail, and a shrill, metallic sound rang out.

Elise had assumed they were all made from mana, so when she heard the sound her expression froze over with surprise. As she smashed the other swords, she looked over in the direction of where the metallic sound had come from.

The real Night Mist was responsible for the sound. An infernal fireball was birthing from its center.

“*«Astral Sun»*”

“You little...!” Elise sent one of her tails over to the spell that was about to be completed. In the blink of an eye, the growing fireball was cut in half. Then it exploded.

Using one massive tail as a shield, she protected herself from the explosion, then used the tail as a spring to get out of the smoke. Having escaped into the

air, Elise gave the pursuing short swords an annoyed glance and continued to smash them with her tails. “You really can’t be underestimated... just how many attributes can you use?” she muttered, glaring down at Alus on the ground. But the only thing she got back was an ominous smile.

Elise became serious and paid close attention to the movement of Alus’ lips. It would be difficult to pick up what he said in the middle of an explosion. But it was easy to read his lips.

“*◀Fall▶*”

“—!!” Whether she understood what he meant or not, Elise spun around in the air and stretched out her tails in every direction as if spinning a web. Two of them stuck into the walls around the training grounds, creating large holes, but fortunately they were between the second and third floors.

The next thing she knew, there were sharp edges in front of her. A massive number of icicles stretched down from the ceiling. If she’d continued escaping towards the roof, she’d have been impaled.

“Despair Execute, is it?!” Alus had predicted her movements and cast spells in rapid succession. Elise realized that she’d been led that way and became enraged.

But her anger wasn’t over the fact that she’d been outwitted. It was at the spell itself. That he thought she could be defeated by a spell of that level was the most infuriating thing. Even though there was no way he’d hear her, she clicked her tongue and spat out, “Don’t underestimate me, brat!”

Alus swung his arm, and the icicles in the ceiling fell down.

In order to get away from the icicles, Elise used her tails to send her body down towards the ground with tremendous speed, flying faster than Despair Execute’s icicles. During her brief moments of falling, the tails swung in all directions, destroying the icicles coming down like rain.

Elise suddenly furrowed her brows. There was no problem with her mana, but the tails that were temporarily connected to her nervous system in order to move freely were slowing down from fatigue. As expected, the problem was stamina. She was also being pulled around by her tails, but there was no point

in complaining about that now.

Her opponent had already gone this far. So he'd probably played all of his cards. But even so, his abilities far exceeded those of the first-rate Magicmasters she knew of. And when it came to mana stores, he had even more than her.

She reaffirmed that his No. 1 rank wasn't just for show. She hadn't been able to confirm everything, but it couldn't be helped in the current situation.

He was the ranked No. 1. Taking pride in that also meant his way of fighting was limited. In reality, she'd only taken the audience hostage to draw him out. She had no interest in slaughtering them indiscriminately.

Though Alus had caught on to that, he couldn't disregard the possibility. He wasn't like a criminal who had nothing left to lose. That's why he had to fight with that in mind. In the end, he chose to wear the shackles of honor by remaining No. 1. His inability to go all out here was proof of that.

If only he could ignore the casualties... Even though it was more convenient for her, Elise unconsciously ground her teeth. She tried to dismiss the strange sensation to think things through calmly. In the end, he just wasn't a match for her. She should be happy that someone was even able to put up that much of a fight. It was the first time she'd even been this cornered. Thinking about it in that way, she felt refreshed and satisfied.

The icicles sparkled as they rained down transparent mana particles.

As she fell and flipped her body around, she gave Alus, who was standing still and watching her, a boastful smile in her mind.

She had surpassed the ranked No. 1.

She had been a proud Magicmaster in the past, before becoming a criminal. She had been proud to stand with the heroes that would save humanity. As a result of competing with others, she'd admired that glorious rank. She'd desperately wanted to stand at the top.

Back then, she was genuinely satisfied with battling Fiends. She was suddenly nostalgic for those days. She missed them. Perhaps it was the cheers of the innocent public that made her feel so melancholic.

But it was fine. It had been a long time since she felt that way. However... indeed, however... *Things are different now... nobody will ever acknowledge me...* Her achievements had faded and been buried in darkness.

Why did it turn out like this? Why was she doing this? She already knew the answer but couldn't stop herself from asking. After all, there was somebody who had taken the spot she once admired right in front of her. No matter how much she wished for it, no matter how far she reached, she would never touch it.

It was the path of light, the opposite of the darkness she was in. The light was too bright and gentle... it was like an illusion, she couldn't look directly at it, nor reach out and touch it.

In her few seconds of falling, all kinds of emotions and unconscious desires flooded Elise's mind. Landing with a heavy sound, she stood back up as if nothing had happened and smashed the final, extra-large icicle falling down from above.

Once she landed, her mind immediately shifted to battle, as if everything before had been a lie. She was breathing heavily. Indeed, she was exhausted. When it came to stamina, Alus had the advantage. But in her mind she had already won. Of course, he'd done his best under the circumstances. In the presence of such a large crowd, he'd given it his all.

Which was why she could take pride in her perfect victory. Life to the victor, death to the loser... that was the rule of this world.

Keeping this up any further would just disgrace him. It would cast a shadow on his position, on the honor of the highest position for Magicmasters.

"That's the limit of the human body," Elise declared. She was euphoric, yet wore a sorrowful expression as she raised her slender arms and spread her fingers. As long as he was human, as long as he was bound to being a Magicmaster, his was an inescapable destiny. If he was going to throw in his lot with the boring masses, his strength would always come with responsibility, and he'd always be expected to carry out his duty.

Meanwhile, she no longer had any oaths or limitations she needed to obey, and she knew that difference created a large gap in battle.

Elise slowly raised her head. Now there was a refreshing smile on her face. The four massive tails turned sharper and pointed towards Alus. It would end in an instant. She had no interest in prolonging something already decided. She would separate his head from his body or pierce his heart to finish it.

However, that was when Alus looked at her and smiled as if scoffing at her.

“You can’t break Tartarus.”

“We’ll see about that.” His eyes narrowed, as if he was still trying to play strong under the circumstances.

Yet... he showed no signs of putting up a fight. He could just be bluffing. While Elise looked at him with a quizzical expression, he folded his arms, then pointed one finger upwards.

A faint unease flashed through her. *Despair Execute was everything...!!* Elise glanced up as if unable to resist, and that was when she realized. *Impossible!*

A massive magic circle had appeared on the ceiling of the barrier. It had six sharp angles and vivid characters in its formula. When she saw that, Elise knew she’d had the wrong idea.

At the six angles were magic formulas for earth, water, ice, fire, lightning, and wind, each with complex lines making up the magic circle in its entirety. It wasn’t something she was familiar with, but without a doubt it should be a spell meant to kill her.

Despite knowing that, she couldn’t help but admire its perfect beauty and flawless construction. She gazed at it instinctively. Magic had affinities and conflicts. It was possible to combine two attributes and cast a spell with synergistic properties.

But it was limited to two. When three or more were used at the same time, there would inevitably be a conflict that would heavily interfere with any spell, so using three attributes at the same time was theoretically impossible.

Water was weak to lightning, and it was possible to alter its nature slightly to get them to work together, but even then, it was difficult to overturn the general principle.

Yet the magic circle Elise saw incorporated all attributes aside from the two elements, light and dark. All attributes had affinities that were superior or inferior. That was why this shape was so beautiful. It was an ideal of dreams... as symbolized by the circle, it transcended reason and showed everything in equilibrium.

Elise wasn't entranced by the magic circle itself. She was charmed by a spell that was in perfect harmony, overcoming any conflicts.

She understood in an instant that Alus had planned it all. Even with such a big audience, they were less of a shackle and more a factor needed to consider in order to accomplish his objective.

The spell he cast carried a clear message that engraved itself into Elise's heart with its cruel beauty. It was him saying he could kill her whenever he wanted.

"B-But if you use that spell here...!!" The damage would be terrible... even with the teachers reinforcing the barrier, the previous spell he used already put the barrier's strength at risk. A spell at an even greater level than that would inevitably... no, she could clearly sense the presence of someone that could negate that possibility.

A person with vast amounts of mana had joined the group outside the barrier at some point. The overwhelming mana poured into the barrier made it far stronger. Even though it was only one, the other teachers couldn't compare.

The Witch—!! She was one of the key players in Alpha's rise to power. Elise had never met her directly, but everyone in the seven nations knew of the specialist in defensive magic.

With the appearance of Witch Sisty, all the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. *That brat, he was waiting for this...!* Anger boiled inside of her, and she raised her eyebrows. "Don't get in the way! You're a mere witch!!"

An especially large tail wrapped around Elise's small body. After a moment's pause, she spun her body around, and her four tails swung open like a creepy black flower, making their way towards the new layer of the barrier. She hoped to gain an advantage by destroying or weakening the barrier. This spell composed of all attributes was being used because the Witch could keep it

contained.

Elise's sharp stare turned to a corner of the second floor of the audience seats. There she was. She had the appearance of a typical witch, wearing a large pointy hat swaying in the air.

However, she was equally angry. In fact, she was sending death glares at the insolent intruder. "There's a limit to how far you can go! How dare you play around with my Institute!" Her words weren't likely to reach Elise, but she couldn't keep herself from saying them.

In a show of fury, Sisty threw off her black robe and held out her staff. Holding her hand over the magic stone at the tip, she poured all of her mana into it. She'd used a little of her mana stores during Godma Barhong's attack on the Institute, but she gathered the remaining mana now.



The four tails repeatedly struck at the new barrier, as if trying to dig their way through. Sisty put her full focus into opposing her. A huge amount of mana blew through the audience seats as a gust of wind.

A couple of seconds had passed since Elise began her attack on the barrier. But Sisty couldn't even count how many spins and blows had hit the barrier in those seconds. The attacks—so fast they couldn't be seen—rained down on the barrier like a storm.

Sisty's mana was being consumed at a frightening pace, like water in a bucket pouring out of a large crack. Even if she opposed her with all of her power, it was only a matter of time before the barrier was broken. "Hey, what are you doing?!" she called out to Alus, panicking a bit. She might specialize in defense, but even she had her limits. Continuing to block this rush of attacks was going to be impossible.

It wasn't in response to Sisty's voice, but in the next moment, the magic circle above Elise shone especially bright. The time limit had been reached.

Elise bit her lip fiercely. With a flood of emotions rushing into her, she realized it was too late for anything. *Run away?! Me?*

With the identity of the composite spell still unknown, she could say the match hadn't been decided yet. She had absolute confidence in her Tartarus. That's why she forced her body that was instinctively trying to get away to stay through sheer willpower.

"A composite spell of all attributes. Hehe, interesting, then I'll just take it head-on!!" Elise poured almost all of her mana into her four tails. The black liquid that made them up turned a solid jet black with no dark red spots remaining.

She looked up at the ceiling with hatred and tried taking a step to change her posture... but! As if answering her fighting spirit, the magic circle had begun to rumble. And Elise noticed her body wouldn't budge.

Even her four tails had their movements restrained, as if weights were attached to them. How much force did it take to make such powerful tails stop moving? No, it wasn't just force...

“—You son of a bitch!!” Elise screamed out, realizing the cause for the change. “You completely fixed all coordinates below the magic circle!!” She turned her glare on Alus.

“Like I said, I have no intention of playing along with your games,” Alus bluntly said, with an expressionless face. The time for observing her had passed. He’d taken the measures needed to make her understand their difference in ability and have her retreat on her own accord.

The best outcome would’ve been if Despair Execute got her to give up. But he’d also decided that it was the last attempt. Alus had gone along with Elise at first, making it look like they were on the same playing field. But only in the beginning.

It was Alus who’d been shown his place when she summoned Leviathan. And he understood then that he’d have to go at her with the intent to kill. If he didn’t, then his disadvantage would only get worse the longer the fight went on, and in the worst case, he might not be the only casualty.

That’s why he used the all-attribute composite spell. No matter the circumstances, the spell would certainly destroy the four tails.

To prepare for it, he crippled Elise’s movements. He fixed the coordinates of everything within the magic circle’s area of influence and wouldn’t allow so much as a pebble to move. It was checkmate. Even if Elise wanted to bring the audience into the chaos, it was impossible now. To undo it, all information in the surrounding space would need to be altered. She might be able to do something and regain a degree of freedom, but she wouldn’t be able to fully break free before it was too late.

Of course, no matter how much mana he might have to spare, it took a big bite out of Alus as well. Although he could handle all attributes, Alus himself was attribute-less. That meant he had no affinities and using spells required far more mana that way, and even making adjustments to advanced spells became more difficult.

Moreover, fixing space itself was pretty much a deciding move on its own. Though the situation could have been much worse if Sisty hadn’t made it here. He never expected he would be forced to use an ultimate-level spell, which was

why he would pay her the utmost respect.

Alus raised Night Mist and quickly pointed its tip towards Elise. “Have you said your prayers? Minalis Folce Quartz... you’re the one who’s going to die. <<*Temple Fall*>>!”

A strange sound echoed throughout the training grounds, as if all matter within range was screaming. The ringing affected all five senses, stirring up Elise’s sense of fear and shaking the core of her soul.

It was a spell she’d never seen or heard of... something she should have been on high guard against. But what was happening around her right now was beyond imagination. No Magicmaster in history had been able to not only use all the attributes, but also cast a spell composed of all of them. Which was why she couldn’t even guess at what it would do.

However, there was no escaping the situation. She’d overwritten the coordinates fixing her in place, but there wasn’t anything else she could do. A wall of light filled her surroundings, so bright it was impossible to see beyond it.

Elise had already given up on herself. She could abandon any attachment to life. But the fact that she refused to give in to this was proof—maybe—that she could still be human.

... If I can destroy that magic circle, I still have a chance! “<<Tartarus>>!!” Elise shouted. She’d freed her body as well as her four tails. And they wrapped around her as they gathered together as one and shot for the ceiling.

The light grew stronger as the tails formed a black spear and soared up. They were overwhelmingly fast and strong. Indeed, not a single spell could so much as scratch Tartarus... or should have been able to.

But the next moment, Elise groaned from the first pain she’d felt since the start of the battle. It was a sharp pain as if a nerve had been torn. Her tails were the strongest shield and spear rolled into one, but they were connected to her nervous system, and now she could feel them being cut away one by one, starting from their ends.

Cries of pain escaped her mouth. “Aaaahhhh?!” It was then that she understood the true ability of the composite spell. It wasn’t an equilibrium of all

attributes. Instead, she witnessed a darkness. And before she knew it, her footing disappeared into a large black maw.

It was as if the concept of time was lost. Everything disappeared into it, aside from Elise. *So it decomposes all matter, organic or inorganic...* it returned all to their origins. It was a phenomenon that happened in the bringing together of all attributes. Everything was literally returned to nothing.

This was a spell only Alus could use. Or more accurately, not even he could use it, save for the mana he had now.

"..." Elise wordlessly pulled her tails back. The partly broken-down tails cut off the light where they wrapped around her. She enshrouded herself in a jet-black cocoon, waiting for everything to pass.

She had some lingering regrets... She believed she would've won if the Witch hadn't appeared. But no, even that was part of his power. It might not have been something as special as a bond, but he had allies. Something she didn't. That was all there was to it.

Oh, I see... it's all different. Elise, locked inside her cocoon, was deeply moved by feelings of resignation and reminiscence.

Everything was different. It had all been decided since birth. She didn't have anything like a better choice to make. There was nothing that could've been changed through her own efforts or help from others. That's why the path she took hadn't been wrong. It was the only one she had...

Elise squinted as the light pierced her cocoon that was breaking down.

Crash! A collapsing sound rang out.

The light faded, and she realized she was still breathing but just closed her eyes. Everything had been determined from the start. It was all preordained, even her fall, and the path of sin she'd traveled down.

So even the effort was wasted. In the end, it was impossible to resist the cold logic of life and death. Resisting was pointless. But just knowing that made the fight worthwhile.

Alus glanced up at the magic circle on the ceiling and sighed. It was still an

incomplete spell. But considering its overly specific composition, perhaps its incompleteness was its true state. The point was that there was a limit to how long it could remain manifested in the world.

Meanwhile, Elise's cocoon made from her four tails was gradually crumbling away. Their shape was no longer recognizable. The surface faded, as if it was made from ash, with cracks running through it here and there. A gust of wind would be enough to make it all fall apart.

Alus caught a glimpse of what happened inside. "—!"

He was astonished for a moment, before understanding everything. He'd thought there would be nothing left of her after the attack... but it seemed she'd survived. Or perhaps been brought back to life was more accurate.

The cocoon made from the four tails was like a womb. In the cracked cocoon, he could see the collapsed inner wall transform into a healing water that filled the inside, regenerating the half of Elise's body that had been destroyed.

Eventually, when her body had been completely regenerated, the four tails disintegrated, having exhausted their power, revealing a curled-up Elise. There was a big donut-shaped hole in the ground, and she'd been left in the center of it.

"... I see. No wonder I thought she was abnormal," Alus muttered, staring at Elise, who seemed to have lost consciousness. "I suppose this was the best possible outcome."

This had begun as planned, but there'd been some unexpected factors in the final stages. And the sight before him was one such thing. Not killing in public sounded great and all, but he couldn't help but frown at how inexplicable her very existence was.

She had an intellectual side that he hadn't expected from an executive of a criminal organization, and it also seemed she had some lingering attachment to the mundane world. If she really was after Alus' life, she wouldn't have gone through such a farce. There were plenty of other opportunities, and even if she had her reasons for doing it during the campus festival, she still could've killed everyone in the Institute. That way Sisty wouldn't have come running.

Considering Elise's skill, it wouldn't be hard to do, and it would've been the most effective way to secure victory. There was no way she wouldn't realize that.

While Alus pondered this, Elise slowly woke up. She looked up at the ceiling, then closed her eyes again.

Alus still had mana left over and could put up a fight. However, Elise didn't have enough mana left herself. Despite that, he remained vigilant, watching her without lowering his guard.

That's when she spoke up. "Alus Reigin, you were blessed by this era."

"...!" A small chill ran down Alus' spine. He narrowed his eyes.

She had gradually opened her eyes. An unfamiliar formula was engraved in one of them.

"A magic eye." *And the One Eye at that.*

"Creepy, isn't it? But I guess you've already surmised how it works. Your skills, theories, none of that existed in my time. If only I had just been too strong... I once crushed this eye, wishing I'd never gotten it."

Elise's eyes were just slightly open. She closed her normal eye to emphasize her magic eye. "But it was pointless. It was reconstructed right away. This is a curse. Those fucking pigs were after this power and they treated me like some fucking toy... but once things started to come out in public, they cut me off without hesitation. Ha ha. Talk about messing with me." Her tone was self-ridiculing, and a twisted smile appeared on her lonely face. It was a hollow expression. Yet, in contrast to that, her eye was beautiful. "I was born in the wrong age."

"Are you stupid...?"

"—!!"

"This is what you get for being so attached to this nation. You could have just given it all up and gone to another nation. You didn't need a rank."

"That's just sophistry. You're still seated at your rank, you're still not letting go of your own rank, are you?"

Alus had some knowledge of Minalis' past. Like how she'd been a Magicmaster and how her feelings back then were probably pure. The information he had didn't tell the whole story, but by shining a light on her past, present, and that eye, there was one truth he could intuit. And he spoke up with that in mind.

Fighting Alus because he was the ranked No. 1. Choosing not to get the audience involved. These were the actions of someone who valued the meaning and pride of rank above all else. However—

"Hmph. I'd give it all back in a heartbeat if this nation would let go of the reins." But that too was just a superficial point. Hollow words wouldn't convince the other party, and nor did they properly convey his own meaning.

"That's why I hate brats... there are things you can't change with just effort. There are things that can't be made right again. Come back when you've lived another twenty years."

"You just didn't do it right. That's all."

"You wouldn't have a clue. Your rank makes sense with your power. But there's a fundamental difference between you and me. That ideal was too bright for me. And I sobered up from that dream the day they ripped my wings off."

Elise expressed what she'd felt for so long, as if venting her pent-up frustrations. She knew it was foolish, but she couldn't stop herself. A torrent of emotions flooded through her, and at the bottom was a child-like envy, wishing she was in his position. She became emotional as a pain she'd forgotten squeezed her chest.

She was surprised at how much she wanted to be in his place. However, putting it into words convinced her. When she was in front of him, she felt all kinds of emotions. Envy, jealousy, and other complicated feelings she couldn't describe, all swirled around inside her.

Why did she have to suffer from that curse? There was no limit to her grudge... her hatred was like a black sludge welling up from within.

Elise embraced herself with her arms, trying to keep her body from shaking.

“It’s all too complicated... I give up. It’s too late for me, too late to think or worry about it.” With a lifeless expression, she covered her magic eye on the left with her small hand, then slowly opened her normal right eye and stared at Alus. But her eye was vacant and unfocused.

“A reflection of a bottomless dark, shadowy, cloudy, black deep sea...
«Abyss»”

She slid her hand off of her face and opened her magic eye. In the bottom of her eye engraved with a magic formula was an indefinable darkness, with countless black bubbles floating around. The ephemeral illusion her magic eye saw was linked with the reality her normal eye saw. Nobody knew how long the bubbles had been there. By the time anyone noticed, they were already there.

However, Alus didn’t move. No matter what kind of spell she would use, he wasn’t going to panic as long as it was magic.

It seemed her spell manifested in the gaps of his consciousness, as the bubbles appeared around him. He glanced at the bubbles floating around the area... and in that moment a darkness filled the entire training grounds.

“See ya, brat.” Abyss was a spell that projected the water pressure of the deep sea into reality, a spell made possible by her accursed magic eye. Any breathing creature would find its body crushed by the water pressure as soon as the spell manifested. Lungs and organs crumpled; bones shattered. There were no creatures on land that could withstand it.

The spell was designated as a taboo, and it was something Elise had gotten as a result of accepting the curse... it was a reflection of her anger, instantly killing anyone she targeted, crushing their very shape. She felt as if it was a power she’d gotten to kill people, as if to affirm the very curse she’d received.

This is for the best... like it should be. Elise wore a crooked smile, as she watched Alus being swallowed by the dark abyss. It wasn’t from joy, nor relief from having won. She simply maintained the smile to try to tell herself she’d made the right choice. When the spell would be released, only a crushed corpse that didn’t even look human would remain, so she put a hand on her hood, readying herself to get out of here fast before the commotion started.

“There’s only one difference between us...”

“—!!”

That's when a voice reached her ears. Swinging his hand to the side as if opening a curtain, Alus appeared, banishing the darkness. He casually walked up as if nothing had happened.

Elise took a step back at the unbelievable sight, before remembering her back was against the wall. There was nowhere to step back to. Her legs got entangled as she stared at the inexplicable, and she ended up stepping on the hem of her robe, ruining her balance. “Impossible!! What did you...”

Taking advantage of the opening, Alus released a very sinister mana. It was only for an instant, and it was likely only Elise who noticed. To the audience, it looked like the darkness was removing itself, as color began to return to the surroundings. The audience seemed to think that she'd released the spell herself.

Abyss was devoured... It felt similar to when Hazan's final attack in the long-range engagement outside Balmes had disappeared. Elise was rendered speechless from surprise and paused to catch her breath.

“The difference between us is simple. You just didn't do it right...!” Alus stared straight at her, as if looking into her soul.

Elise's heart suddenly leaped. She now understood the meaning of his words. Indeed... like her, he had a special ability that would make others avoid him.

When she realized that, her heart finally stopped resisting. There was probably a small difference in their circumstances, but it wasn't enough. He'd started under the same circumstances as her, yet made a name for himself. If so...

That's what Alus meant. And it was what Elise finally acknowledged. She was the one who had chosen the present. She'd been the one who hadn't moved to prevent it from happening.

It was true she hadn't asked anyone for help, nor did she use everything in her power to help herself. Somewhere deep down inside she'd given up, letting herself wallow in anguish... she'd closed herself in without trying to get out.

“Hehe, ha ha ha ha... Aahh, what a fool. What was I even doing...? I see, so I

was wrong all along...”

She must’ve found something funny, as she spread her right hand and covered both eyes with her left, as she cackled. She laughed it all off, and Alus felt some pity as he looked at her.

When he’d guessed Minalis’ name, he’d understood that there was nothing left of her past. And when he’d exchanged words with her during the fight, he’d felt something as well. She had probably loved something too much. Perhaps it was the nation of Alpha. Or maybe it had been the brief moment in time when she walked in the light as a young Magicmaster full of ideals.

With a dry laugh, decades of regret condensed into drops as clear as fresh water poured out from Elise’s normal eye. They were clearly different from tears of anger or hate.

After laughing, Elise took a deep breath. Her tiny body shook, and she tasted air fresher than anything she’d ever tasted before. With a satisfied exhale, she pulled her hood down over her eyes.



The audience had been glued to the scene in front of them. What unfolded before them was completely unprecedented, and many even forgot to blink. It wasn't long ago that the place had been filled with throat-crushing cheers. But now it was so quiet, you could hear a pin drop. They even kept their breathing quiet by reflex. The infinite possibilities of magic had been shown to them.

Only the people on the third floor of the audience seats could see the bottom of the hole in the training grounds, and even then, they had to lean over.

The match had given them hope for raising the flag of humanity's counterattack high. It had been a century since the Fiends had appeared... and it had been the same amount of time since humanity had to live with the thought of their own demise constantly in the back of their minds.

That threat was still just as real. The memory of humanity being reduced down to seven nations and crammed into a birdcage was still fresh in their memories.

But they had a hunch that the ones on the training grounds right now were the saviors that would fulfill humanity's dearest wish. This battle convinced them that humanity wouldn't fall behind, no matter what the Fiend.

They would pay the Fiends back for the hundred years of pent-up bitterness... Excitement gradually filled the audience's hearts, and their shoulders and lips started trembling. Not a single person considered it a student's mock battle anymore. It was a demonstration of the best Alpha had to offer.

Everyone was at a loss for words, unsure of how to praise them. That's why silence dominated the training grounds for a few moments. They were probably waiting for the signal that the battle had ended. For the signal that would pull them back to reality.

As all watched, Elise covered her magic eye with her hand again. But not to attack. When she lowered her hand, her eye was back to its usual amber color. It had probably been camouflaged by a film of water, but Alus didn't even bother getting back into a stance.

Elise jumped off of the island in the middle of the large hole and gracefully

landed on the other side. “Will you chase me down, Alus?” she asked with a teasing tone.

But Alus just shrugged. Then, as if to indicate he was tired, he put an arm on the opposite shoulder and started rubbing it. “No, I still have work left to do for the campus festival. Besides, this was just a mock battle, wasn’t it?”

“—!! Hehe, I see... then I have my duties as the loser to fulfill.” Talk about messing around. Elise was exasperated. But she wasn’t overly displeased. If anything, she was in a bright mood and felt an unbearable amusement well up. *I pray your softness won’t come back to bite you. Or maybe you already know what I’ll do?*

Alus looked at her as if wondering if she still wanted to fight, but she simply brushed it off. As the loser, she would obey the victor. She grabbed hold of the edge of her hood and pulled it down further. Then she slowly raised one of her hands. “I give up,” she said in a clear voice.

In that instant, the audience stood up before the result was even confirmed on the big screens. “OOOOOHHHH!!” They erupted into cheers and applause so loud they drowned out the buzzer. Even if their words were impossible to distinguish, they still screamed out their praise. And they continued even after their voices were hoarse.

The booming cheers pierced the barrier, and Elise was stunned. She gazed around the massive audience. *Ahhh, how long it’s been...* The earth-shaking cheers celebrating the glory and pride of a Magicmaster. She was reminded of her past when she’d polished her skills for humanity’s sake, a past she’d been proud of. Even her attachment for that rank, which she thought she’d never reach, was drifting away in the aftermath of the battle.

Collecting herself, Elise raised her chin and hid her eyes beneath the hood. Her mouth was closed tight. A moment later, she could see Alus move on the opposite side of the hole.

Alus purposely put on an act, waving to the audience. There was no reason for him to go to such lengths just to make the audience believe the battle was only a match. But right now, he didn’t feel particularly bashful about it. It was trivial when compared to Elise’s many years of anguish.

Straightening his posture, he put a hand over his chest and elegantly bowed to the audience. The audience responded with even louder cheers.

Then... he quickly swung his arm to point at Elise.

Huh?! The gesture was completely unexpected and confused her. However, a wave of applause washed over her, regardless of how she felt. For just that moment, the thundering applause felt good.

In response, she slowly raised her slender arm. Repressing a bitter expression, Elise waved to the audience and forced a smile.

She understood Alus' intentions and that she should follow them. However... she was bewildered by her feeling of embarrassment and sharply stared at the young man who'd put her in this predicament. But Alus was still bowing, not looking her way, so her wordless complaint missed its mark.

As a seemingly unending storm of applause washed over them, Alus and Elise walked towards the exit. Elise was slightly ahead of him, and as he looked at her small back, he couldn't help but let a wry smile show at his unusual behavior.

Suddenly, the red-robed girl spun around just before the exit. "Just so you don't get it wrong, my name is Elise now, not Minalis. And as thanks..."

She continued to speak. In a few seconds she said some words that seemed significant, just between the two of them.

"..." When Alus heard what she had to say, he stiffened slightly. However, his expression remained unchanged. He narrowed his eyes as he pondered how to take Elise's information.

After a short sigh, he waved his hand as if shooing away a cat or dog. Normally, he'd be disciplined for letting Elise go. But he still went ahead with it.

Or perhaps it was his way of repaying the favor for what she'd just told him. He also threw in some extra words as a bonus. "... The army will send pursuers after you. I imagine it'll be a couple of Doubles. So just lose them, and don't misstep again."

If Sisty made proper arrangements, the pursuit would begin the moment Elise

stepped out. But now that Alus knew her skills, any haphazard pursuit would be meaningless. It would be simple for her to outrun them. If anything, he wanted to prevent any casualties on the military side.

Which was why—"I'll take care of the rest... so don't kill anyone in vain anymore."

Elise put on a twisted smile and lightly nodded.

Alus shrugged, shaking his head at Sisty, who was trying to appeal to him about something with her eyes. He was indicating to her that pursuing Elise was pointless and for the Institute to keep their hands out of it.

Sisty seemed to understand but gave him a suspicious stare. She also kept her guard high as she stared at the dangerous little girl leaving. But Alus brushed it off, reaffirming that they shouldn't do anything more.

So Sisty shook her head in resignation, and once the barrier was gone, Alus walked from the exit to the connecting passage. When he did, a hint of exhaustion mixed in with his expressionless face.

Elise was already long gone. Her presence had suddenly cut off, as expected from an executive of a criminal organization. He could understand why it was so hard to find any leads on them. And with her speed and martial arts skills, the military's pursuit would be fruitless.

Meanwhile, the cheers that reached all the way to him were still as passionate as before. *Geez, I guess it turned out just like Tesfia said.* While it was unavoidable, his relatively calm Institute life would without a doubt come to an end now.

Looking towards the end of the aisle leading to the audience seats, Alus could see students blocking the aisle all jumbled together. Of course, not many of them were familiar to him. With his exit blocked, he looked up in the seats to Sisty for rescue.

Sisty sighed exaggeratedly, but she was still the Institute principal. Her body softly floated up and landed next to him. As such, Alus was able to view her entire body and couldn't help but say something unnecessary. "Don't you think that outfit is just too outdated?"

“How rude! I always wore this when I was in active duty... well, I’m still active duty in a sense.”

That’s why he called it outdated. Then again, it did fit Sisty’s nickname. She wore a jet-black robe and wielded a high-spec staff with a wood grain pattern on its white surface. The staff had a magic stone on its tip.

But if it was just the props, Alus wouldn’t have said anything. It was the pointy hat that was the deciding factor. Seeing how she’d been a big help with the barrier, it was clear that this was her combat outfit, but it felt out of place.

Did she pick that outfit after being nicknamed the Witch, or did she get the nickname for her outfit...? It didn’t really matter, but he did wonder as he looked at it with a cold gaze.

However, Sisty didn’t seem to mind. “Now then, Alus, let’s have a nice long talk about this in the principal’s office,” she said with a wide smile, though she looked exhausted. Her tone made it clear he had no choice.

“...” She was stretching her joints, so maybe she was hinting for a massage. Then again, that would be a cheap price to pay, but... Alus smiled stiffly.

Meanwhile, beyond Sisty’s contrived smile, he saw her eyes twitching, and he sighed inwardly and braced himself. He could come up with all kinds of reasons for why he let Elise go, but truth be told, he didn’t really understand it himself... at any rate, there was no escape.

“With this, the special mock battle has come to an end. The remaining matches will be played once the training grounds have been repaired, so we ask for your patience.”

The heated audience slowly cooled off thanks to Felinella’s announcement. But as they calmed down, they started looking in Alus’ direction, which he didn’t enjoy. He could also hear all kinds of whispered rumors, whether he liked it or not.

Civilians limited their impressions to just the mock battle. However, the Institute students took it one step further, as they actively exchanged thoughts and speculations.

Right now, the students freely made their guesses regardless of their class

year. They'd even blocked his way as they stared at him in a fluster. However, nobody had the courage to ask Alus directly... as a result, they were simply a disorderly mob that did nothing more than stare.

But it wasn't the usual gaze they had for him, the one that told him he didn't belong. Instead, their looks were filled with enthusiasm and admiration.

With a dumbfounded expression, Sisty walked forward with Alus. As she approached, the crowd parted to let them through.

"Mr. Alus!" The first to call out to them was Felinella, who'd been helping out on the announcements.

Wary of others that might be listening in, Alus quietly asked her for another favor. "Feli, good work. I'd also like to ask if you could call Loki over."

"Ah, y-yes! ...So where should I send her?"

"I sent her out on personal business, but I was hoping to have her participate in the upcoming mock battles."

It was an excuse to get Loki off of the pointless pursuit, but for a moment Felinella looked stunned. The match he'd just been in was on another level, and she knew their lives had been at risk. Yet Alus made it sound like it was just another campus festival event. Of course, she'd already heard it but was still baffled. "I-I understand... uhm!"

"Hm?"

"No... never mind." Felinella stumbled for words, but ended up saying nothing, shaking her head. It wasn't something to discuss here. But her consideration for their surroundings wasn't the only reason she was so vague. She ultimately decided she should keep it to herself.

She'd been the only one in the commentator's seat at the time. It was normally not used, but she needed to stay near it to make announcements when necessary. So what happened was simply inevitable.

Back then, she hadn't realized that she'd accidentally turned on the listening device that picked up the sound on the training grounds. Then again, if she'd turned it off the moment she did, there wouldn't have been any problem.

However, when she heard that voice, she couldn't bring herself to turn it off, even though she knew eavesdropping was wrong. She didn't regret it, but it sprouted a seed of anxiety. It was the words Elise told Alus as a sign of her gratitude.

Felinella didn't fully understand it, and she was sure Alus would be fine even if danger was approaching... but she still couldn't help but feel worried.

Once the two were out of sight, she let out a heavy sigh. *I have to do something...*

Despite her frustration, she first had to do as Alus asked and call Loki back, who was on guard for any further intruders coming from the outside. She figured making an announcement would be faster and turned to go back to the training grounds. It was a short distance, but she met with an unexpected delay.

"Socalent...!"

She tilted her head, as she felt an intense stare pointed her way. The person used her last name, so it felt a little formal. Upper-class rules were a tricky thing, and though it could be overlooked between two women, when it came to the opposite sex appearances were important.

As a result, she noticed that she spoke to the other party, Delca Base, in a stronger tone than usual. It was understandable after watching a match like that. "What is it, Mr. Base?"

"... You knew from the start, didn't you?"

"What might you be referring to...?"

Delca looked at Felinella with suspicion but shrugged and gave up in the end. "Alright, I'll leave it at that. But are you sure? If you're not careful around *him*, even you might not get away with it."

Single Digit Magicmasters were valued far more highly than the average noble for their abilities and rarity. And in the military, they were the equivalent of a general in rank. In that sense, Delca's worries were partly correct. Singles were indeed in a position where they could decide the fate of nobles, depending on the circumstances.

He couldn't be blamed for his concerns, but that was only because he didn't know what kind of a person *he* was. Felinella, on the other hand, knew... he was unsociable, but he wasn't the kind of person to flaunt and abuse authority. Though that was mostly because he had no interest in it... and the fact that she knew his character made her feel somewhat happy.

"Mr. Alus isn't the kind of person who would get angry over trivial things like that," she told Delca, putting a hand over her mouth to hide a smile.

Seeing Felinella like that made relief wash over Delca, as he crossed his arms. "I see, if you say so... in reality, I was scared I might have done something to him in the past," he added in a whisper. He then continued, "I think this might be too much for the campus festival."

"Yes, maybe so," Felinella replied with a wry smile. She agreed with him. How she dealt with the gossip spreading through the campus would be a true test of her skills. She wanted to suppress the rumors and bring things back to the state they were in before.

Alus paid a hefty price this time. At this rate, the time he intended to spend his own way would without a doubt be greatly reduced. From here on, she would have her own fight as the management committee chairperson. "Now, please return to your work. I will call Ms. Loki back."

"Y-Yeah... but what do we do about this?" Delca asked, as he stared into a seemingly bottomless hole. If he didn't close that up, there wasn't going to be a next mock battle.

"Hmm, that is a problem... Well, why not have our teachers give us a hand?" Felinella said with yet another wry smile, as she smoothed her long, black hair with her hand.

As he hid his exhaustion from overusing his mana, Alus quietly went with Sisty to her office. He'd suspected he might get surrounded by students on their way there, but fortunately they made it there safely. It seemed a large number of visitors and students had gone to the training grounds, leaving the campus somewhat deserted.

There were so many things to think about that he honestly didn't want to have to explain the situation to the principal or deal with any other unnecessary hassle. Then again, some of what he had to think about included things he'd need to explain to Sisty, so he'd still have to do it.

Sisty got the ball rolling. "You're as extraordinary as ever," she said in an exasperated tone.

Alus paused for a moment, thinking of how to reply to this. "... Thank you very much."

"Is that sarcastic?"

"What else would you like me to say?"

"Well, you could say something like, 'I'm still no match for you.'"

"Do you really want me to say that?"

"... Now that would be sarcastic. But—"

Alus had a good idea of what she was thinking, and politely said, "Yes, indeed. If you hadn't come, I wouldn't have been able to use that spell."

"So you do get it! From now on, I'd like you to make sure that information is properly conveyed, not leaving things out for your own convenience."

"Even if you say that, I didn't think it'd go that far..." He'd read Jean's report after his battle with Elise, but she was even stronger than described in the report.

Alus' expression turned serious, and he confirmed there was nobody outside the door before he spoke. "Principal, she was a wielder of a magic eye... and the One Eye of Salem at that."

"—!! So it exists. Well, if the Eye of Providence exists, I suppose it's believable."

"However, she seemed to have complete control over it. Still, you don't look too surprised."

"I am quite surprised. But there are a lot of gruesome records from the past that can't be revealed about magic eyes, so I don't know much about them

myself. To think, though, that one is in the hands of someone opposing Alpha,” Sisty said, taking off her pointy hat and putting it down on a nearby sofa.

She then sat down in her chair. “Shall we get to the main topic, then?” she said, looking directly at Alus. “First, why did you let her escape? You would’ve been able to handle it, no? And you know who she is, don’t you?”

Alus didn’t reply immediately. Instead, he sat down on the sofa across from her. The pointy hat had been placed in the closest seat, so he sat down in the opposite seat. He didn’t have to answer her questions. Though, since he’d asked Sisty for reinforcements, he felt he should explain the bare minimum at least. “Simply put, it’s just a hunch.”

Sisty slammed the table in response. She was being strangely intense. Her expression was grim, a far throw from her usual aloof look. “Just a hunch? Handling the culprit of this incident goes beyond your discretion. And mine too, of course.”

Faced with Sisty’s anger, Alus calmly averted his gaze and said, “True, letting her go was my own decision. But I have no reason to be that devoted to this nation. Don’t misunderstand me, I’m only a member of the military for now. I’m ready to drop this title at any moment.”

Sisty sighed. “You never change. I mean that in a bad way. But that aside, the sparks will be hitting us too.” She looked at Alus’ indifferent attitude with exasperation. It hadn’t even been a year since he enrolled at the Institute, but that feeling that he’d changed must have been her imagination.

“Principal, can you listen until I’m done speaking?”

“Yes, yes. Then please give me an acceptable explanation.”

“But before that, I have a request.”

Again? Sisty thought, and she had a reluctant look, but Alus ignored her.

He raised a finger and explained himself. “Could you alter part of your report to the top brass? ...No, I guess that’s the wrong way of saying it. I don’t mind you calling it my fault, but I want you to leave a certain part out. More specifically, I want you to leave out the intruder’s magic eye... its name to be exact.”

“You don’t mind if I decide after hearing your explanation, do you?” Sisty, of course, had a sullen look on her face. After all, he was asking her to get involved in his personal circumstances.

Alus saw that she was suppressing anger and decided this was a decent middle ground. He nodded.

Sisty then gestured with her hand for him to begin.

He chuckled to himself in his mind. He was always being taken advantage of, so it wouldn’t hurt to enjoy this a little. “The name of the opponent I fought this time is Minalis Folce Quartz, a former Magicmaster of Alpha’s military. She’s calling herself Elise nowadays, though... Have you heard of her?”

Sisty shook her head, not seeming to have any idea of who she was.

Seeing that, Alus told her. “She’s a former Single Digit Magicmaster from over 50 years ago.”

“Ah! Huh?! Uhm?” Of course it sounded ridiculous. Even if she’d reached the position of Single in her teens like Alus, she still would be considerably old today. But to anyone present, the intruder had looked like a young girl.

“The magic eye plays a key part in that. It’s probably a side effect from the eye. She doesn’t age.” It would have been fine if that was all. Alus had a hypothesis that Minalis—Elise—could restore her body by using mana as a source to power her magic eye as a medium for her special ability. Considering what he saw in the cocoon, he was all but convinced of it. In fact, she’d never shed a drop of blood during the entire battle.

“... And what proof do you have?”

“I saw a glimpse of that power. She also hinted at something like it in a roundabout way.”

It was hard to believe, but if she really was as old as she said, it was extraordinary that she was able to put up a fight like that. But still... For the time being, Sisty pushed that doubt into a corner of her mind and changed gears. But Alus looked like he still had more to say.

“Minalis, no, Elise... is currently a member of Kurama.”

“—!! T-Then—!”

Alus thrust out his hand, interrupting Sisty. “Don’t jump to conclusions. We probably can’t disregard the reason why she is with them. I once came across some top secret military document from the past. It included a plan for some illegal research, and it probably concerned Elise, seeing as how it mentioned immortality.”

“W-Wait a second! You mean that a group in the upper brass selected a Single to be a test subject for their illegal research? And that was this Minalis?” Sisty asked, hoping that it really was just a small group in the military. She was relieved to see him nod his head and waited for his next words.

“That’s right. She was a successful example in controlling the One Eye of Salem. I think that’s why almost all public information on her was erased. That’s why I need you to fulfill my request from before.”

Sisty quickly caught on to what he meant. “You mean it would be bad if she was captured and that was made public?”

“Well, Alpha would lose authority on a global scale. It’s beyond what they can handle internally. They used a valuable Single for cruel experiments that caused massive troubles, losing her in the process. Moreover, their handling of the situation most likely pushed her towards becoming a member of a criminal organization.”

Alus bluntly continued, “If Alpha still had her, they probably would’ve had fewer casualties during that massive attack the Three Pillars were sent out on. A lot of people died, after all... you could say what the military did in the past was an act of treason against all humanity.”

Sisty bit her nail, racking her brain. But it was useless to think about it. If the public found out, it wouldn’t be strange for the entire military top brass to be replaced. It was even possible that Alpha’s military itself could be torn apart.

Seeing her nervous gesture, Alus followed up with a final attack. “I believe you saw it for yourself, but Elise’s summoning magic is too dangerous. If that thing got summoned in its full form, this nation might be ruined. But if you’re fine with that, I can go out and join the chase now... though you’ll probably have to find a place to pile up the bodies.”

“... You bully.”

“What?”

“You brute! You know I don’t have the authority to do that! And even if I did, I couldn’t make that kind of decision...” Sisty sniffed.

Seeing her eyes moisten, Alus’ face twitched a little, as he felt that he’d pushed a little too hard. He wasn’t the kind of person to hold back because an older woman cried in front of him, but maybe he’d been a little too mean.

“Sorry, I said too much. But you understand now, don’t you?”

“That’s true. Then there’s nothing that can be done. I didn’t know anything, okay? Only the one who fought her in person could possibly know the details, okay?”

“...”

Sisty’s expression had changed like she’d flipped a switch, and she nonchalantly put a finger on her chin as she spoke. Even though she’d been in tears moments ago.

She got me. Alus didn’t know exactly how she’d gotten him, but he had a vague feeling like he’d lost, even though he had said she could put all the blame on him.

Once she saw the bitter look on his face, Sisty’s expression turned a little serious again. “Publicly is one thing, but we can’t just let her be.”

“I know that. And this is just another hunch, but she might leave Kurama soon. At the very least her position and state of mind should be a little different from before. And it’s not like I don’t have any ideas about what might happen next.”

“Like what?”

“That’s a secret. But it should work out nicely both for Alpha and for her.”

Sisty doubted that such a perfect solution actually existed. But seeing how Alus seemed sure of it, she had no choice but to accept it. “Those stubborn old men in the top brass aside, you should at least tell Governor-General Berwick. Just in case something happens.”

“I thought of that too, but let’s keep quiet about it. In case something does happen, there’s a difference in responsibility between him knowing and covering it up, and not knowing at all.”

“You sure are being soft on the Governor-General... I wish you would direct some of that kindness my way.”

“... I did say that you can just blame everything on me while you didn’t know anything about Elise, didn’t I? How much more reverence can I show?”

“Not reverence. Kindness! I’m not old enough to be shown reverence!! How rude.” Sisty puffed up her cheeks, and that gesture was only acceptable when looking at her appearance. If you took her actual age into account, it became extremely hard to mentally accept it.

“If there’s a plan to eliminate Elise, I won’t take part in it. I’m pretty exhausted after that battle, after all. Not to mention the poor match-up between fire and water would make it difficult to send Lettie out. So I think it’s best to just watch over it for now.”

“I don’t want it to turn into a big deal, okay?”

“It already is. But if she does leave Kurama, it might only be a matter of time before it breaks apart.”

“She’s that important?”

“Did you see the last spell she used?”

“Y-Yes.”

“I believe that spell was a result of her magic eye combined with a vast amount of mana. She called it Abyss, but she would’ve been able to use it on the entire training grounds and crush the audience flat... that’s how troublesome she is. To be honest, I don’t know how well even high-ranking Magicmasters would fare against her. Even with countermeasures, it would be a fifty-fifty chance if the ranked Nos. 2 and 3 fought her together. And that’s if it’s only a match... if they’re trying to kill each other, it would be zero.”

“Is that opinion really accurate?”

“It’s only based on my own battle with her, and I don’t know everything about

her magic eye. So I'm really only half-sure." He'd talked about Kurama falling apart, but that was just simple guesswork. He thought back to the long-distance battle near the deposit in the Outer World. There was no doubt that the opponent Jean fought back then was Elise. He could also estimate the strength of the big man that Rinne had seen, but he wasn't that much of a threat. And Alus wouldn't fall behind in a one-on-one battle.

He still didn't have all the information on the other members, but he found it hard to believe they'd have other monsters like Elise. As long as that was the case, a few Singles would be enough to destroy them.

The reason Elise had even shown up like she did was almost certainly because Alus had been marked. In the past, he'd been sent out on a secret mission to kill someone suspected to be a Kurama executive.

Then again, sending in the other nations' Singles would be unrealistic unless the Kurama threat was on the same scale as a Devourer. So going after Alus—an overwhelming asset and threat—was an effective strategy.

But if Kurama were to lose Elise in the future, they would lose one of their major trump cards. And when that happened, an opportunity to crush them would arise.

It would, of course, depend on what Elise did with the information she got, but Alus had a feeling she would share it with the other executives. Judging from Elise's words and actions regarding that big man and how she had appeared here on her own, it was clear that Kurama wasn't a monolith.

Not being able to come out swinging themselves was frustrating, but they should be fine just staying prepared for any eventuality.

Still, to think a properly controlled magic eye would be so troublesome. As a researcher, Alus' interest in magic eyes was insatiable. He recalled the promise he'd made with Rinne about his research. It was bound to be a blissful time full of intellectual excitement and the joy of new discoveries.

Alus was enjoying his thoughts, as Sisty's voice brought him back to reality. "I understand. Leave the reporting to me. But I will make full use of your permission to blame you to avoid any suspicion. We'll also need to improve the Institute's security."

“That’s fine. Thanks. But shouldn’t you be chasing me out of here?” Alus thought he might be doing that, if he were in her position. Elise was a bit of an eccentric, so things had ended up in a farce today, but if she got serious about killing Alus she had plenty of ways of going about it.

“I’d prefer it if Kurama didn’t attack. But you’re a student of this Institute. You really are a handful, but it’s my job to protect this place and its students. Not to mention I’m sure they’ve learned a lesson or two after my grand showing.”

It was hard to tell if she was being serious or joking from her tone, but with such a bright smile on her face, Alus could only smile back wryly.

“Well, the campus festival can go on, so it’s all good. Besides, if something does happen, you’ll help out, won’t you?” Sisty said with a mischievous smile.

But Alus accepted with a serious expression. “Of course. It seems they’re after me, so I’ll take care of it before it becomes a big deal. I’m not good at being on the defensive.”

Eventually, Alus left the principal’s office, and Sisty received a report that the target had escaped.

Having safely made it through the first day of the campus festival, Alus made his way home with Loki after checking in on Tesfia and Alice.

Of course, he told them there wouldn’t be any training during the festival. Though he could tell that they’d be fine after a short rest. He also thought it would be a good idea to keep a video of their fight for reference in their training, but it seemed it was still too early for that. At the very least, it would have to wait until they’d gotten back in form.

With the exciting day over, the Institute turned so silent in the evening that it seemed like a tranquil illusion.

The students were returning to their rooms after completing their preparations for tomorrow, but there were still quite a few students that weren’t finished. With those students in the background, Alus turned his attention behind him, but without looking back.

Loki silently followed one step behind him. If he had any hesitations, it was about this relationship. He already had an idea of what she'd say when he spoke in a tone like he was talking to himself. "Say, Loki. How far are you going to follow me?"

He wasn't referring to distance. He really didn't know what would happen to him going forward. Something awful could happen that brought misfortune or ruin.

Loki quickened her pace and reached Alus' side. She gave an immediate answer that indicated her acceptance of everything. "Anywhere, of course."

"Even if I'm not the ranked No. 1?"

"A foolish question."

"Even if I'm not a Magicmaster?"

Loki looked confused by Alus' repeated questions, but her attitude remained unchanged. "Foolish questions. I will follow you personally wherever you go, Sir Alus."

"Foolish, huh."

"Yes."

Hearing her unhesitating answer, Alus strengthened his resolve. "Things are going to get busy from now on, Loki."

"Is it related to that Elise girl?"

"You could say that it is, and that it is not."

She looked a little displeased at his playful answer. "Then let me hear it when we get back to the lab." She bent forward and looked up at his face. "I would also like you to explain who you spent such a long time talking to today... and what you were doing with Felinella."

"..." Alus glanced at her like he'd feared this would come. The waves of mana he'd felt while guiding Noir and having lunch with Felinella must have been Loki's. But it wasn't until now that he'd realized it was meant for him.

It would also mean she'd played dumb when they met up at the training

grounds. Perhaps she had been letting him run free. But as he was racking his brain for excuses, he couldn't help but remember Elise's last words.

Kurama will make a move, huh. And to give that information to me...

Kurama, the criminal organization rivaling Singles. They'd clashed with Alpha's military in the shadows before, but it seemed they were finally going to make their move.

They would need to be on guard for Single Digit Magicmasters, so it wasn't wrong to go after Alus first like Elise did. He then thought back to the rest of what Elise left him with.

"It was the sweet whispers of the dead that led me here" ...was it...

"What an ill-natured riddle to leave me with," Alus grumbled to himself. Supposedly a third party had been the instigator. Perhaps that would be the key to the events to come.

Kurama and the military were two opposing organizations. Yet Elise had pointed to a third's existence. And not knowing its affiliation was even more discomfoting. If they had brought Elise in, then it would make sense that they were on her side, but from her tone it sounded like she shunned their existence.

Then there was her method of forcing her way into the mock battles. If that hadn't been of her own accord but at the behest of someone else, then they must really like making bad jokes.

"This is going to get messy."

"I believe running away would be acceptable," Loki suggested with a straight face.

She gazed into his eyes as if to say that it would be perfectly justifiable. She firmly believed that Alus had the right to stay out of trouble. And she also knew he wouldn't make that decision.

"I'd love nothing more, but the balance of the seven nations is in a precarious situation right now. If something bad happens, then everything I've done to make life easier and training them will have been for nothing."

Alus thought to himself that he really was just making up excuses. No matter what he might say, from an outsider's perspective, he looked like he was unexpectedly having fun.

"I thought you would say that, Sir Alus," Loki said calmly.

He had been sure she would pout, so it was a bit anticlimactic. At the same time, he felt like he'd lost a bet he had no control over. It was as if she knew everything.

Meanwhile, Loki's resolve secretly strengthened. She didn't know anything about where the world's greatest Magicmaster, Alus, would go from here. But what of it? She would simply follow this boy no matter what happened. Anywhere and everywhere, no matter what path he took.

With that, Loki gazed up at him and broke into a smile.

"Then I suppose I should work a little more, so that I can take it easy."

Alus' words strongly resonated with Loki, as they walked together in the setting sun.

Afterword

Thank you for reading Volume 8 of *The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan*. Izushiro here.

Some time has passed, and we've entered a new year since we last met. In this volume, the imperfect genius Alus' power becomes well known. There's a sense of eeriness in the air as his peaceful Institute life is smashed to pieces. Some part of the story has also been left out of this volume but will be covered in the next.

I'd now like to move on to my thanks. Thank you very much to Miyuki Ruria for the beautiful illustrations. With new characters introduced, the story's scope grows ever bigger.

I would also like to express my deepest gratitude to my editor in charge, the editorial department, the proofreaders, and everyone involved.

Finally, I would like to thank you, the reader. I look forward to seeing you again this year.

—Izushiro

“Pardon me
for not naming
myself. I am
Noir Valis
Oud.”





“Here
you
go.”

Felinella held out a
piece of fruit on the
toothpick to Alus.



Bonus Short Stories

A Lady's Rightful Decision

At the Second Magical Institute, there were plenty of students from old and distinguished noble families.

After all, the job of a Magicmaster was a sublime one of fighting Fiends that threatened mankind. That's why not everybody could become one, as even the talented got further sifted through by a difficult test before being allowed to enroll.

In that sense, those from the nobility had a better chance, since they had financial support as well as more time to focus on training and studying. Moreover, the children of those families had a tendency to strive to become Magicmasters out of tradition. Because of that, the students at the seven institutes in the seven nations were unpolished gems, chosen from the best of the best.

And at the highly-esteemed Second Magical Institute... she was expected to have a bright future. Even as she briskly walked down the hallway, she continued to wear a smile.

It was a flawless smile, hiding the exhaustion from not only being an honor student and the female dorm supervisor, but also from the expectations everyone constantly piled onto her. She was adored by her juniors, and her classmates treated her with the same respect they gave to the teachers. Everyone's attitude in her presence was extra accommodating when they took what noble family she was from into consideration.

Her—Felinella's—family name, Socalent, carried a lot of influence within the Institute.

Many Magicmasters lost their lives in this day and age, but Vizaist Socalent, one of the Three Pillars, made remarkable progress, and had risen to be known as one of the three great nobles in Alpha.

And his daughter wasn't only counted on to serve as a role model for other students. She was expected to behave as the very picture of nobility. Yet Felinella never once considered this to be troublesome. In fact, she took pride in all the attention and admiration she received.

But because of that, she tended to have a lot of responsibilities pushed onto her. Indeed, the truly talented were sometimes elevated to high positions by those around them, even when they didn't want them.

Right now, she was in a quiet classroom after hours, and her gallant appearance from before was gone. She rested her chin in her hand, and sighed. "I was an underclassman last year, so I was able to refuse because of it. But this year I'll need a different excuse. The chairperson of the management committee for the campus festival... if possible, I would've preferred that they ask someone else," Felinella muttered, glancing at her childhood friend Illumina.

The plan to entice Alus wasn't seeing much progress, as her time was taken up with daily studies and helping Vizaist with his information gathering missions. She rarely even had the chance to speak with him lately.

And that was when she was recommended to be the chair for the management committee. The position didn't exactly require a vote, but nobody would object to Felinella. It was practically common sense in the Institute.

Felinella's own desires barely even mattered, and with all the expectations placed upon her, it was no different from strength in numbers. It was practically a fixed game.

Not to mention that it had happened right as she was fantasizing about the idea of enjoying the campus festival with Alus, so it was like a bolt from the blue. She wanted to refuse, but it was obvious that she'd be going against the consensus of the entire Institute. That was why she wanted a convenient excuse. And so she placed her hopes on her best friend.

"You know it's not happening."

She knew the blunt answer was painful to hear. But Illumina knew Felinella couldn't betray everyone's trust. That was because deep down, she understood how suitable she was for it. Third-year students were regularly scheduled to

train for the military, since they would be assigned after graduating, so many didn't even show up for classes. Moreover, those third-years with job offers already lined up had no reason to interrupt their training to take on the position of chairperson.

Eventually, Illumina reluctantly craned her neck over to look at the troubled beauty. "The chair is chosen from among the Institute's top students, and only those who are well-behaved. You already know that them asking is just for show. Besides, there's no room for argument, Feli. You're the only one who can keep the students together."

"What I'm saying is that the amount of work is extraordinary. And during the campus festival I'll be stuck in a cramped room."

As the winners of the Friendship Magical Tournament, the Second Magical Institute's campus festival would see an enormous number of visitors, and no one aside from her would be up for the job.

"But if we're talking about ranking, there's Ms. Loki, too. The other students wouldn't complain if it were her..."

"There'd be nothing *but* complaints. Charisma is more important than rank for the chairperson. Not to mention that you turned it down last year because you were still a first-year yourself. Besides, she's..."

Even outsiders could tell Loki was attached to Alus at the hip. She wouldn't listen to anything they had to say, and would refuse the offer in a heartbeat.

The reason Illumina was lingering here so long was because she wanted to help out her best friend somehow. Thinking about it logically, there was no choice but to do so. Felinella was the only one who could be the chair, meaning that she would be the obvious choice for her assistant.

"Feli, you've got some cute underclassmen in Ms. Tesfia, Ms. Alice, and Ms. Loki, so why not pitch in and help this once? Think of it as making memories."

"Are you sure you're not just saying that because you know I can't refuse? I can't tell if you mean it or not."

"Well, Alus left the tournament partway through, so why not have him do a job with you for the campus festival?"

“...! Then I’ll accept! In exchange, you’ll have to be flexible with his time!”

“You make it sound like I don’t have a choice...” Illumina sighed. “Well, it’s not like it matters. But you’ll have to make time for it on your own.”

A smile returned to Felinella’s face as she said, “Leave it to me!”

The First Errand for Someone Over One Hundred

Anyone watching would think her appearance was pushing it a little. Unless she was really cold, she looked like a criminal trying to avoid the public eye. She wore a baggy red robe way too large for her, its long sleeves completely covered her short, thin arms.

It was a look that stood out in the small market in the city center. The way she walked with her hem practically dragging across the ground made everyone gaze at her with worry. But considering her youthful appearance, there were quite a few kind passersby who wondered if she’d gotten separated from her mother.

Every time they asked, Elise bowed deeply and gave them an adorable smile. Even now, a kindly middle-aged woman had worriedly called out to her. “No, mama is still at home... I’m going out to buy bread and milk and uhm...”

For the time being, she gave her the answer a child would. She had perfectly copied the mannerisms that a child that age would have.

Seeing that innocent smile immediately made the caring woman smile back at her. “Oh, is that so? Is this your first errand? And here I was, thinking you were lost... If there’s anything you don’t understand, you can just ask me, okay?”

Nice, motherly words came pouring out one after another from the woman’s mouth as she smiled with affection. Now that people understood the situation, the ones around the girl began to relax. They began to cheer the little girl, Elise, on from a distance.

At the same time they slowed their pace. The people that were shopping warmly watched over the girl. No matter what store she went to, everyone would surely be very cooperative towards her. If she said she forgot her money, the clerk would surely break into a smile and say that she could return with it

anytime.

As she wandered through that atmosphere, pretending to look for the store she was after, she felt incredibly bitter inside. She couldn't help but let out a frustrated sigh.

Damnit?! I know I shouldn't stand out, but I hate that I can so easily rely on this method.

Elise had indeed come here searching for something. And the method she used to peacefully get around was her appearance. If she claimed she was out on an errand, she should be able to blend in... and that hadn't exactly been wrong, but she hadn't expected to gather a different kind of attention.

She wished she could ignore them, but people being kind and protective wouldn't leave someone as adorable as her alone. "... I wonder if this is what they call sinful..."

Elise eventually walked into a store, as a large number of adults watched over her. She was actually after a book, and a rare one at that, a relic regarding magic. Which was why she was looking for antique shops so she could ask if they had a certain book.

But the store she'd gone into was a small bakery instead. The interior had a modern look, with the aroma of freshly-baked bread wafting through the air.

Elise glanced around the store and caught on to the situation. She unconsciously twitched. *What am I even doing here? It's like I was lured in by the smell!*

When she turned around to go back outside, she found that adults had gathered by the window display and were watching her.

As she looked their way, they all very obviously averted their gaze. At the same time, she felt a sense of warmth in the air. They were all relieved that she'd safely reached her destination.

From her point of view, it was very unfortunate. She felt like expressing her regret for the current atmosphere.

However, she found herself unable to turn around and leave. She could feel

that the eyes on her, both inside and outside the store, wouldn't allow it.

Finally, Elise directed a hollow smile towards the lady at the bakery register, and walked up to her. Once she was there, the lady spoke to her, bending over the counter, and Elise found two 'oversized buns' in front of her face. That also got on her nerves, but there was no helping it now.

Elise pulled her hand out of her sleeve. "Two croissants... please," she said, which prompted the lady to burst into a smile.

... Shortly thereafter, she was given freshly-baked croissants, as well as some extra bread. With short steps, she left the market behind.

Her audience saw her off, exchanging smiles with one another. They inwardly praised each other for their consideration, and were moved and satisfied with what had happened. After all, they'd helped a young girl take her first step towards adulthood.

They had been able to watch over the girl from a distance, and see her accomplish her goal without them needing to say anything. They'd been nervous at times, but continued watching over her until the end.

Their eyes remained on the girl's small back until she was out of sight... and the market then returned to its usual bustling state as if nothing had happened.

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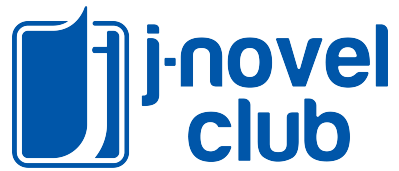
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The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan: Volume 8

by Izushiro

Translated by Warnis Edited by Jan Suzukawa

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